

"I TAKE MY STANCE WITH CARE IN SUCH A WORLD": PACIFISM,
QUAKERISM, AND HISTORY IN THE WORKS OF
WILLIAM STAFFORD

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DEDICATION

I wish to dedicate this dissertation to my son Matthew and my daughter Caitlin, hoping that they might also one day believe in and work for peace.

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PREFACE

Learning about the poetry of William Stafford, his pacifism, and his spiritual beliefs has been a profound experience. My own personal biases and involvement in this project are complex. In 1971 at 19, I found myself sailing across the Atlantic standing precariously on the deck of the USS Shreveport. A Naval Academy midshipman at the time, I remember a moment of revelation on that deck in which I wondered what must have been obvious to others: why would people devote so much time, energy, and money to building a ship whose sole purpose was to kill other people? Yet my father had been a naval officer in World War II, and from my own voracious (bloodthirsty) reading of military history, defending my country seemed a noble, morally sanctioned pursuit. Still, Vietnam had disillusioned the whole nation, and I grew increasingly doubtful about my military future. I resigned and became a tentative pacifist. Like Stafford marching off to his first CO camp, when I left the Naval Academy, I also, in effect, left mainstream America.

My study of Stafford, pacifism in America, and Quakerism has deepened my distaste for the boyish ideals of military heroism that I was raised with, ideals I believe our culture still looks to blindly. Bill Clinton is

apparently genuinely hated by the World War II generation of George Bush and Bob Dole because they can only conceive of heroism, of service, in terms of military service.

Ironically, though Clinton has managed to employ military force thus far in the service of "peacekeeping" (excluding, perhaps, his adventures in Iraq), he has stated more than once that he wishes he had served in the military. One imagines that he might be boyishly eager to lead the nation into a real shooting war. The partisan, competitive nature of American politics, business, media, and sports--which worsens yearly--reinforces the flag waving militarism which, despite the counter-cultural revolution of the 1960s, still controls our culture and political course.

In the first chapter of this dissertation, I attempt to show, through a review of Stafford criticism, that few critics have taken Stafford's pacifist beliefs as a starting point in their criticism. By Stafford's own admission, however, becoming a conscientious objector during World War II was the crucible of his young manhood. Out of the fire of this experience, I argue, comes some of Stafford's most important poetry.

Chapter Two maps the often hazy boundaries of the American pacifist subculture by applying a New Historicist perspective to Stafford's central autobiographical prose work Down in My Heart (1947). Chapter Three explains how Stafford's adult identification with Quakerism resulted

naturally from his pacifist world view and provided him with a method of terminology to pursue intertwined moral and aesthetic goals.

Chapter Four examines Stafford's continuing protest against literary elitism as part of his general challenge to unexamined tradition and the power of authority. Part of what Stafford terms his "pacifist protest" against Modernism and New Criticism involves his uniquely negative reaction to the status and politics of Robert Frost. The last chapter of this dissertation is a reading of representative poems through the cultural prism of Stafford's pacifism and Quakerism. Much of this analysis is an examination of the relation of power to tradition and history. Stafford's pacifist poems, particularly, gently rebuke an American culture that too often seeks to overcome and coerce its members instead of setting them free.

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William Stafford, who died in 1993, enjoyed a fifty-year career in poetry and is regarded by many critics as a major poet. There is nothing approaching consensus, however, on how to read his work. He is seen variously as a regional poet--though which region is disputed--, as a metaphysical nature poet in the vein of Robert Frost, and as a 1960s protest poet. Stafford resolutely rejected critical labels and especially literary source studies as being fundamentally incomplete, preferring instead to talk about writing from a "tradition of total experience."

This dissertation attempts to locate William Stafford in the little-recognized American Christian pacifist culture. His anti-war poems are, perhaps, his most enduring literary contribution, and they flow naturally from the beliefs and assumptions of this culture. By closely examining Stafford's

pacifist memoir Down in My Heart and contrasting its pacifist stand with the 1940s American war culture, one can better understand his later suspicion of and quiet rebellion against both governmental propaganda and literary tradition.

Through a New Historical approach to Stafford's theory of history, with special emphasis on the Marxist ideas of Michel Foucault, I trace the roots and the effects of this profound clash of war and peace cultures in Stafford's essays, letters, and poetry.

CHAPTER 1
"THE INDEPENDENT RIVER"

William Stafford lived through violent times. The year of his birth, 1914, marked stalemate and profitless bloodletting in the trenches of Europe in World War I, a war that effectively ended illusions about peace and "moral progress" in Western Civilization. Subsequent twentieth century conflagrations, particularly the Holocaust, would mock the idea of civilization and challenge the very existence of a divine order. By the time Stafford died at 79 in late August 1993, he had lived through a time period encompassing two World Wars, the Great Depression, Korea, Vietnam, and countless other smaller historical traumas--through most of the violent, difficult history of this most horrifying of centuries. His life began with the threat of war in Serbia and ended seventy-nine years later during a new outbreak of that old conflict. As a pacifist by upbringing who later embraced Quakerism, Stafford might have appreciated this cyclical "Halley's comet" of war and would have wondered at, but not have been surprised by, the enduring power of ethnic and religious bigotry over generations of otherwise peaceful individuals.

On the day of William Stafford's death on August 28, 1993, the front page headlines of The Washington Post present a typical list of domestic and international violence in our century. The August 28th headlines include "Aspin Lists Goals in Somalia" (the Secretary of Defense groping for achievable military objectives), "Desperate Muslims Hold Aid Givers Hostage" (dateline Mostar, Bosnia), "Pentagon Nominee's Father Served as Nazi SS Officer," and "The Curious Continue Waco Siege" (four months after the botched ATF raid). These stories demonstrate in microcosm that violent force is an accepted tool of political policy around the world and that, as a matter of record, politics and martial force are inseparably linked. On the Post's inside pages, the developing stories, while uniformly grim, are cushioned, incongruously, by Labor Day Sale advertisements adorned by smiling young models in breezy fall colors.

Stafford's America, our America, is a place of murderous violence and holiday sales, a collage of fractured experiences in a culture both produced and made trivial by capitalism. Many thoughtful Americans of this century have despaired of a culture of deceptive advertising and consumer self-indulgence. Interestingly, William Stafford, who consistently challenged American tradition in whatever form--and paid a severe personal price as a result--never gave in to cynicism or despair, or to the irony and satire

such reactions often provoke. This willful innocence in the face of human cruelty, stupidity, and tragedy has amazed--and sometimes repelled--Stafford readers who do not understand its political and spiritual sources.

Upon his death in 1993, Stafford's many friends paid tribute to his dogged optimism and thorough humility.

Wolfgang Saxon, in a New York Times Stafford obituary, describes him as a "private, but not alienated, citizen of the universe" (A18). In "Remembering an American Poet: William Stafford," the poet Robert Morgan recalls that Stafford at readings

liked to say he wanted to "witness" a poem to the audience. One had the feeling that everything he did was witnessing. For him, poetry was a spiritual enterprise, a lifelong testimony to the restlessness and richness of the human spirit. (A18)

William Heyen remembers how Stafford once said at a workshop, "I love feeble poems." For Heyen, an ardent admirer, that sentiment summed up Stafford's life stance completely:

four little words that swirled everything together for me, that challenged the scientific-industrial complexes that our minds are in danger of becoming, that protested our arrogant deconstruction of the ecosystem, that sang out for compassion and love that might save us. (A16)

A Survey of Stafford Criticism

While many critics have come around to the idea that William Stafford might be a major American poet, such recognition has been slow in developing and much debated.

Stafford has been unquestionably popular with readers worldwide since the 1960s, particularly since the publication of Traveling Through the Dark in 1962. Critical acceptance, though, after initial enthusiasm has often been muted and hesitant. Greg Orfalea, writing in 1979, theorizes--and his ideas still apply today--that Stafford has been appreciated but "somewhat neglected" by critics because first, he is a "centrist, in both theme and style" and is, therefore, hard to define (280). Stafford is also "at core, a moralist," and moralist poets are out of fashion. In addition, because Stafford started publishing late--he was 46 when his first book West of Your City (1960) came out--critics have not been able to see, and thus write about, any dramatic evolution in his career. Orfalea also points out that American Western writers often get labeled narrowly as "local color" writers (280-281). Stafford's own modest nature also doubtlessly made him less dramatic than other poets and thus less apt to engender critical or personal attention. In addition, his prosy, free-verse, non-allusive style does not lend itself to precise discussions of technique or sources of influence. In any case, Stafford's work is voluminous and, therefore, difficult to digest.

One might build a case for Stafford's historical contribution to American poetry, however, on several levels. Certainly his opus is large enough for such consideration;

he enjoyed a nearly fifty-year career in poetry and produced eleven books: West of Your City (1960), Traveling Through the Dark (1962), The Rescued Year (1966), Allegiances (1970), Someday Maybe (1973), Stories That Could Be True (1977), A Glass Face in the Rain (1982), Smoke's Way (1983), An Oregon Message (1987), Passwords (1991), and My Name Is William Tell (1992) (his last seven collections were published by Harper and Row). He also co-authored Seques: A Correspondence in Poetry (1983), with Marvin Bell. In addition, Stafford produced twenty-five chapbooks as well as three books of prose: Down in My Heart (1947), Writing the Australian Crawl: Views on the Writer's Vocation (1978), and You Must Revise Your Life (1986). HarperCollins also has recently published The Darkness Around Us Is Deep: Selected Poems of William Stafford (1995), edited by Robert Bly.

In addition to his long writing career, Stafford's many honors and long second career as an influential teacher argue for permanent significance. His honors include a National Book Award for Poetry in 1963 for his second book Traveling Through the Dark (1962), the 1964 Shelley Memorial Award from the Poetry Society of America, and a 1966 Guggenheim fellowship. He was named as Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress in 1970 and served many years as Poet Laureate of Oregon. A Glass Face in the Rain (1982) and An Oregon Message (1987) were given the Award in Literature by the American Academy and Institute of Arts and

Letters. Stafford was also honored by the 1992 Western States Book Awards for a Lifetime Achievement in Poetry (Andrews 8).

Stafford's life, too, presents a particularly mobile American journey. A native of Kansas, Stafford graduated from the University of Kansas and spent 1942-1946 as a conscientious objector assigned to four Civilian Public Service work camps in Arkansas, Illinois, and California. After working briefly for the Church of the Brethren's World Relief Service, Stafford held several teaching positions in California and then began teaching at Lewis and Clark College in Oregon. He received a Ph.D. from Iowa in 1950 and returned to Lewis and Clark, where he retired in 1980 (Andrews 6, 9). His poetry readings, as well, drew him to nearly every state in the nation and to many foreign countries.

Whatever his historical status, there is nothing approaching critical consensus about Stafford's poetry; Stafford seems to resist any single category. He has been grouped with and compared to an amazing range of contemporaries. Donald Hall, writing in 1979, notes that chronologically Stafford, born in 1914, belongs to the "tragic generation" of Weldon Kees, Randall Jarrell and John Berryman, "three suicides [like Stafford also born in 1914]; Delmore Schwartz was born in 1913 and Robert Lowell in 1917." Hall notices "how wonderfully the survivor

[Stafford] contrasts" (147). Judith Kitchen, on the other hand, suggests that Stafford may have more in common with younger poets like James Wright, Robert Bly, Richard Hugo, and Donald Hall (13).

George Lensing, in Four Poets and the Emotive Imagination: Robert Bly, James Wright, Louis Simpson and William Stafford (1976), links Stafford with post-World War II poets who depart from the categories of "the Academic," "the Beat," and "the Projectivist" (3). Lensing quotes Donald Hall's definition of the "Emotive Imagination" as employing "'a colloquial vocabulary, a simple language, and a profound subjectivity, distinguished particularly by the use of the imagination.'" Hall explains that the Emotive Imagination "'reveals through images . . . general subjective life. This universal subjective corresponds to the old objective life of shared experience and knowledge'" (4). Lensing explains that this kind of poetry "does not lend itself easily to a method of critical analysis in which paradox, irony and multiple layers of ambiguity are valued, at times, as ends in themselves" (5-6).

Representing yet a different approach, Lawrence Lieberman, in Unassigned Frequencies: American Poetry in Review, 1964-77 (1977) associates Stafford with John Berryman and James Dickey as "personal" writers who became well known in the 1960s, who "ran against the grain of literary fashion," and who worked alone. Lieberman calls

this poetry "expansional" and explains that it differs from the confessional work of Lowell, Sexton, and Snodgrass since confessional poets are limited to writing "autobiography" (265). "Expansional poets" like Stafford, argues Lieberman, "are projecting--not merely 'expressing'--the sum total of vivid personality in their work. At the same time, their poetry is a medium for discovering or creating, a sensibility" (265). Lieberman sets this approach in opposition to T. S. Eliot's idea of the artist's necessary "extinction of personality" (264). Of course, as Eliot pointed out, only someone with a personality would know what it meant to want to lose it.

Every Stafford critic notices his affinity for the natural world--whether in a Midwestern, Western, or Northwestern setting. In conjunction with this, various critics and interviewers, including George Lensing and Ronald Moran, point out the importance of myth-making in Stafford's poetry. These myths are often set in the West and usually have a Native American Indian tone and geography. John Lauber in "World's Guest: William Stafford" and Richard Hugo in "Problems with Landscapes in Early Stafford Poems" see Stafford as primarily a poet of nature, of "country things" (Stafford was often asked--to his complete annoyance--about this implied parallel to Robert Frost). Charles Altieri, however, complains that at his worst Stafford (and others) employ a phony "scenic style" in

which actual geographical locations are presented as an excuse for "justifying" whatever the poet felt like saying. While this characterization is doubtlessly true of others, Stafford's identification with the natural world is longstanding, intimate, and usually unforced.

Stafford's prosaic style draws as much comment as his choice of subjects. Paul Zweig also compares Stafford to Frost, particularly in their shared, effective "conversational style." Zweig believes that Stafford's best poems suggest "a sort of narrative plainness that recalls Robert Frost" (605). At the same time, Zweig believes that Stafford's "simple language" at times becomes a "mannerism" and the "transparent sense of myth or folktale . . . a deliberate naivete" (605). George Lensing, while admiring the myth-making qualities in much of Stafford's Western work, echoes this complaint, writing that though "eluding the pretentious, some of [Stafford's] poems succumb to a false folksiness . . . and his attempts to coin a pity aphorism at the end of a poem sometimes emerge flat and clicheish" (210). Until recently, it was a rare critic who admired Stafford without serious qualifications.

Linda Wagner, an early Stafford advocate, summarizes Stafford's "plain-style" of poetry as including "homey language and idiom . . . running sentence rhythms and casual throwaway lines, and the recurrence of Mid-Western locations and characters. . . ." Stafford's style connects "phrases

piled on clauses" keeping the "voice sounds going," as Whitman would, accumulating and "modifying ideas" (19). Wagner, though, similarly faults Stafford's use of aphorisms while favorably comparing Stafford to Whitman in their mutual concern for morality: "more than any other contemporary American poet . . . Stafford delivers injunctions, prescriptions, prohibitions, and gentle curses" (25). She applauds Stafford for being a poet "concerned with the way man is living, the way man has to become himself." Stafford is "willing to take the same risks that Whitman took, because his 'mission' is great enough to obscure pure art" (26). Wagner believes that Stafford's poetic "mission" grows out of his "plain-style" view of life; that, in fact, his artistic style and sense of morality are one:

Conscious of his immediate world in all respects--the rhythms of its language, the objects of its physical world, and the real character of its people--Stafford feels a heavy responsibility to share his views with other human beings" (26).

As evidence for Stafford's moral focus, Wagner cites his introduction to the poems of William Everson (formerly Brother Antoninus) in which Stafford praises Everson as a poet from an earlier time, "'a sage, sometimes almost a prophet, a model of some kind'" (27). Wagner contends that while Stafford's poems hardly employ the

same "prophetic, oracular tone," they do take the same "stance of responsibility," often consisting of "moral pronouncements" (27).

While granting him his popularity, Stafford's detractors, like Roger Dickinson-Brown, lambast these same "moral pronouncements" mixed with what they view as casual aesthetics, affected humility, and "complacency." In "The Wise, The Dull, The Bewildered: What Happens in William Stafford" (1975), Dickinson-Brown wonders at Stafford's early "cult reputation." He perceives it as "growing beyond that even of the most important, 'established, contemporary poets'" (30). He complains about an air of "dominating wisdom" in Stafford's writing that "tends to deprive all human, and even wild, physical details--the grace of gesture, the motion of leaves--of any kind of significance." Dickinson-Brown is most disturbed, however, by a "tone of complacency" in Stafford's poetry "that kills perception." He cites the poem "Deerslayer's Campfire Talk" from Allegiances (1970) as exemplifying "a man seduced by his own habit of being very simple and very wise":

Wherever I go they quote people
who talk too much, the ones who
do not care, just so they take the center
and call the plans. (35)

He also dislikes the "complacent" tone of "Any Time," (also from Allegiances):

(Waves will quiet, wind lull; and in that
instant I will have all the time in the world;
something deeper than birthdays will tell me

all I need.) (35)

For Dickinson-Brown, Stafford's "simple wisdom," "complacency, sentimentality," and "strange philosophical" mixture of the "concrete and vague" has produced a "dull style." He is also annoyed by certain "quasi-formal" stylistic elements in Stafford including "random rhyme and off-rhyme; lines that nearly scan to one system or another; groups of lines that look but don't act like stanzas" (33-34). Dickinson-Brown theorizes that some of these objections involve Stafford's "over-publication" where his best poems are diluted by a flood of inferior efforts (32).

Roberta Berke, in her Bounds Out of Bounds: A Compass for Recent American and British Poetry (1981) also complains about Stafford's stylistic weaknesses, suggesting that the "intensity" of his poetry over the years has "diminished." This weakening, Berke believes, is "partly the result of his simple style, which is not always inventive enough to follow the complexities of his ideas; these then appear in some poems as flat philosophical platitudes" (123).

Jonathan Holden, the author of The Mark to Turn: A Reading of William Stafford's Poetry (1976), while an admirer, comments as well on Stafford's often vague style, suggesting that some of Stafford's poems are necessarily "oblique" in order "perhaps to soften their didactic element which runs directly against current taste." Holden sees good reason, therefore, for Stafford to obscure his message

since "it is virtual dogma . . . that the more easily the reader can abstract a poem's content the worse the poem is, that explicitly didactic verse barely deserves the name 'poetry'" (6-7). Even so, Holden reads many of Stafford's poems as "openly didactic." Holden, for example, finds "Watching the Jet Planes Dive" (from West of Your City 1960) representative of what he describes as Stafford's "sermonic stance":

We must go back and find a trail on the ground
back of the forest and mountain on the slow land;
we must begin to circle on the intricate sod. (7)

Holden, in good New Critical fashion, is primarily interested in uncovering what he perceives as Stafford's "coded language," where words like "deep," "dark," "cold," "God," "home," "near," and "far" make up a "symbolic shorthand of interlocking metaphors" (7). Holden also suggests that Stafford's poetry has an affinity to Wallace Stevens's work in its emphasis on the "playful, resilient" imagination. While Holden alludes to Stafford's rural Midwest background and places him, loosely, in the tradition of American transcendentalism, his New Critical approach generally ignores the particulars of Stafford's life (74). Indeed, almost all of Stafford's critics have ignored these details.

In a 1978 interview, Richard Elsworth asks Stafford to respond to Mark Strand's criticism concerning the "self-righteousness" and "preachiness" in Stafford's work.

Stafford replies that he does not feel "righteous" when he writes, "only curious" (99). Yet along with the charge of moralizing is what some see as Stafford's essential anti-intellectualism. To Alan Williamson in Introspection and Contemporary Poetry (1984), the effect of Stafford's "anti-intellectualism" is an "indifference to the whole technical aspect of poetry Formal meter is rare, but so is any organic relation between form and specific content, of the type recommended by Williams and his followers" (101).

Stafford is most often analyzed as a regional poet--though which region he represents is in dispute. While from the Midwest, Stafford is also viewed as a Western or Pacific-Northwestern poet, having lived for most of his adult life in Lake Oswego, Oregon. Sanford Pinsker identifies Stafford with other Northwest poets in his Three Pacific Northwest Poets: William Stafford, Richard Hugo, and David Wagoner (1987). Pinsker asserts that Stafford has a "reverence for place, for the land, that gives a decidedly western feel to his poetry" (51).

David Carpenter in his study about Stafford for the Western Writers Series treats him as primarily a Western writer, though admittedly a transplant. Carpenter, curiously, believes that Stafford felt he had "betrayed" his Midwest home and compensated for this betrayal by "idealizing" the West and lamenting its exploitation (5). According to Carpenter, "Stafford believes that an

individual's psychological and spiritual health depends upon an almost religious identification with the relatively wild, non-human world" (17).

By contrast, Stafford's nephew Patrick Kelley contends that although Stafford had lived primarily in Oregon for decades, the West is simply an "extension" of his Kansas roots. Kelley implies that Stafford's poetry idealizes the Kansas of memory since it emphasizes the virtues of rural, small-town Kansas while omitting the details of some of its uglier features, like the Klan:

The Ku Klux Klan was vigorous in the state in those days . . . [Stafford family] Legend shows me no beatings or lynchings, but the cross burnings were there, and the tirades against the Jews and Catholics and the Negroes. (30)

Stafford throughout his career patiently resisted the regional label of Western, Northwestern, or even Mid-Western writer. He felt that all poetry is "local" somehow, so that specific locale does not necessarily help locate a writer. This is not to say, of course, that Stafford is the best judge of his own "place" in American poetry, geographically or historically--a point that he would have readily conceded.

There is little doubt (as both Carpenter and Kelley point out) that Stafford's poetry is more country than city. But while his poetry often idealizes country things and small town life, at its best it counters such nostalgia and sentimentalism with the sharp edge of Stafford's ingrained

pacifist values, so opposed themselves to what most Americans believe. And while Stafford feels at home in nature, he harbors no illusions about its dangers. In "Elegy," for example, Stafford's speaker remembers a nighttime walk with his father, also a pacifist:

One night, sound held in cornfield farms
drowned in August, and melonflower breath
creeping in stealth--we walked west
where all the rest of the country slept.
I hold that memory in both my arms--

how the families there had starved the dogs;
in the night they waited to be fed.

The poem appears to be a memory of and tribute to Stafford's father, who died in 1942. It is the third poem of Stafford's landmark collection Traveling Through the Dark (1962) and demonstrates his difficulty in following his pacifist father in an America so inherently hostile to pacifism. "Elegy's" wistful sense of father-loss is mixed with the suggestion of the careful, dangerous walk that all pacifists must make past normal "sleeping" Americans, that is, those who are morally asleep but deadly when aroused. Addressing the father, the speaker longs for a clearer spiritual trail to follow, for peace markers:

At sight of angels or anything unusual
you are to mark the spot with a cross,
for I have set out to follow you
and these marked places are expected

.
Sometimes I look out of our door at night.

When you send messages they come spinning
back into sound with just leaves rustling.

Come battering. I listen, am the same, waiting.

(STCBT) 62-63)

Pacifism in America, of course, has produced few "marked places," few monuments, and scant historical recognition; and its devout practitioners, including the Stafford family, labor almost unknown to American history. In Stafford's "At the Un-National Monument Along the Canadian Border," for instance, the speaker notes with chagrin that the longest undefended border in the world is a place that draws little attention:

This is the field where the battle did not happen,
where the unknown soldier did not die.
This is the field where grass joined hands,
where no monument stands,
and the only heroic thing is the sky.

In fact, since Benedict Arnold's failed invasion of British Canada in 1776, Canadians and Americans have worked steadily to live in a mutual harmony of interests. Stafford's wry suggestion here is that while American culture makes certain war places sacred, like Gettysburg and Arlington--which are essentially cemeteries--there are those undramatic fields where a war did not happen but could have, where peace prevailed. These are also worthy of celebration:

Birds fly here without any sound,
unfolding their wings across the open.
No people killed--or were killed--on this ground
hallowed by neglect and an air so tame
that people celebrate it by forgetting its name.
(STCBT 17)

This border is Stafford country--a place that ignores the tradition of political maps, a place where one nation flows seamlessly, "un-nationally" into another because peace

prevails. The "ground / hallowed by neglect" evokes, obviously, Lincoln's famous Gettysburg address: "This hallowed ground." In a television interview, Stafford comments that Lincoln's speech eulogizing the war dead after the great battle elicits both his admiration and his uneasiness:

Surely we all feel a combination of things when we encounter something like that speech. Part of our feeling is positive, and I feel that; but also I feel haunted by unrest about that pattern--to live in a world in which my best impulses have to feel that the ground is hallowed by a great deal of blood. Maybe we are all trapped in a set of myths and reverberations of experience that have come upon us through the inventions of many people, and we are beset by the fact that there could be better ones out there somewhere.

(WTAC 126)

While a growing number of critics speculate about Stafford's style, writing methods, and mysticism, Stafford's Christian pacifism has received only perfunctory attention. Even Stafford himself declined to make too much of his pacifist faith as a major theme or direct influence in his poetry--while at the same time acknowledging its centrality to his life (Larson 11-12). Donald Hall in an essay from On William Stafford (1993) correctly senses the importance of Stafford's Christian pacifism to the understanding of his poetry. Comparing Stafford to his contemporary poets, Hall asks, "What makes him so different?"

Like Lowell, Stafford was a C.O. during the Second War. Like Berryman and Kees he came from the Midwest. But Stafford is a low-church Christian far from the rhetorical Catholicism that Lowell and Berryman entertained. I suspect that his

survival is related not merely to his Christianity but to his membership in a small, embattled, pacifist sect. (147)

What "sect" Hall is referring to here is unclear; Stafford had ties to both The Society of Friends and The Church of the Brethren. But Hall is right in emphasizing the influence of Stafford's pacifism.

Judith Kitchen in her Understanding William Stafford (1989) also agrees that Stafford's years as a CO during World War II were "formative":

what had previously been belief hardened into practice. His emphasis on listening, his patience, his long-range goal of internal change-- all stem from this period of his life. . . . Stafford learned to look hard at both sides of any question. (5)

In addition, Kitchen observes that Stafford has been dismissed by some critics as simply another protest poet of the 1960s and 1970s because of his many college readings against the Vietnam War. Actually for thirty years, Kitchen points out, during war and peace, Stafford performed readings around the country (one year he counted thirty-five) (Kitchen 8), consistently presenting his quiet pacifist protest against war and bigotry long after the protests of the 1960s had faded into history.

Kitchen's Understanding William Stafford (1989) (the only other book-length Stafford study besides Holden's The Mark to Turn) presents a perfunctory critical overview of Stafford's life and works. She describes Stafford's style as "avant-garde" and his poetic "sensibility" as one that

"accepts change but is unchanging itself" (12)--she does not elaborate on this paradox. Kitchen, in peroration, surmises that "In the end, the poems are about love--about daring to love under hard circumstances and in difficult times" (28). Wary of any kind of biographical criticism, Kitchen, like Holden, marks Stafford's unusual pacifist-religious background, but seems reluctant to link it to his poetics. This link is surely crucial, however, to understanding Stafford's world view.

A Pacifist's Upbringing

Stafford himself regarded his pacifist commitment to become a CO as a turning point in his life. He begins a 1986 autobiographical essay in You Must Revise Your Life (a collection of essays and poetry) with river and story metaphors for his writing and life experiences. In his description, Stafford uses a characteristic mark of punctuation, the colon, to lead himself on to discoveries and explanations:

My life in writing, or my life as a writer, comes to me as two parts, like two experiences: rivers that blend. One part is easy to tell: the times the places, events, people. The other is mysterious; it is my thoughts, the flow of my inner life, the reveries and impulses that never get known--perhaps even to me. (3)

His poetic process both relies upon and ignores the current outward "story" of Stafford's life.

This second part wanders along at its own pace, caught up in a story that touches that outward story but is not the same. Often this inner story hardly belongs to the place where I'm living.

Whatever the calendar says, whatever outsiders demand, this other part of my life doubles back and becomes involved in its own chosen events.

My writings are current manifestations of that blending. My poems, especially, are not to my mind crafted objects but little discoveries in language that spring from the encounters between outer events and that unpredictable--and never sufficiently identified--mysterious river.
(YMRYL 3)

Both "inner" and "outward story" to Stafford are apparently both stories, that is, fictions. Stafford's personal life itself--as distinct from his "life in writing"--is, to paraphrase one of his book titles, simply another story that could be true, depending upon what one views as truth. Whether Stafford's life history is perceived accurately by him is to Stafford something for others to judge, just as others must judge his poetry (WTAC 18). For Stafford, everyone's life is more like a "cliff-hanger adventure novel" than an historical chronicle available for scholarly evaluation (WTAC 39).

Later in his autobiographical essay, Stafford continues the river metaphor to describe his decision to register under the Selective Service in early 1942 as a conscientious objector. This choice was to him the crucial decision of his life:

My four years of "alternate service under civilian direction" turned my life sharply into that independent channel of the second river--a course hereafter distinguished from any unexplained life, from the way it might have been in any of my hometowns. (YMRYL 11)

Stafford sees moral choice, in other words, as somehow "blended" with his writing. Consequently, Stafford's "independent" life could not go "unexplained," unlike the lives of most Americans who are not compelled to defend their everyday actions or life choices. Stafford's life as a pacifist would be subject to intense examination by himself and adversaries.

Deciding to serve as a CO during World War II, of course, was a profoundly unusual choice. Stafford seems to wonder in the above passage about what kind of mainstream life he might have had selling tires or insurance policies had he not chosen that difficult path. Life to Stafford, like art, is existential and therefore conditional; one can always choose one direction or another, and the choices reflect and fashion both character and art. One makes choices "nudged along" by intuition and, as Stafford would put it, accepts the "bonuses," sacrifices, and the surprises of the process (WTAC 18).

Stafford's turn into "that independent channel" in 1942 at 28 marked a lifelong divergence from any kind of "normal" American way of life, though the preparation for the break had been long in coming. Stafford was raised in a household where conventions were consistently if quietly challenged. Not only was his father an ardent pacifist, but Stafford's mother would not even let young Bill join the Boy Scouts

because of the military uniform (YMRYL 4). Stafford relates how his parents and his early reading also kept him from feeling the usual hatred for wartime enemies:

Another early favorite [childhood story], and one among many that influenced me when World War II came, was about a "little boy named Gottlieb in a country far from our own." Germany came into my consciousness by way of such verses; I felt a pang of yearning and fellowship. (YMRYL 4)

Although Stafford's parents were Christian, they were never attached to any particular denomination. The Staffords went to church in the various small towns in Kansas where they lived, having to move frequently looking for work during the Great Depression ("William" 331).

As an undergraduate at the University of Kansas, Stafford plunged into the world of creative writing but also ran headlong into the urgent moral present of the mid-1930s. His family's custom of questioning traditional assumptions and social practices prepared Stafford for social activism. He recalls the pressure of the coming war and the bigotry around him:

But the stories and poems no longer tracked along with the outer events that came from recollection: history was stalking us, and my role in the life around me took a twist that was to make a great difference. One part of the strain was the emerging certainty of World War II Another part of the strain was a sense of wanting to protest on campus; there were customs that hurt. Some of us would go into the cafe at the Union and have a sit-in, to break down the policy against serving Blacks--"Negroes," in those days. The Union policy was that segregation must be preserved. Any student could order, but White and Black could not sit together and be served. So we would sit apart, be served, then take our food and

sit down together. I didn't have to be black to be bitter about it. ("William" 332)

History, thus, for Stafford is both a "stalking" predator and an atmosphere presenting moral choices. It is not simply an object of study in college textbooks, but rather a dangerous natural force, a "creature" one must prepare for and confront on personal ground. It is not coincidental, by the way, that Stafford associates a local tradition of bigotry and hatred--that is, segregated seating--with the more national hatreds expressed in war.

"Serving with Gideon" (a letter poem to Marvin Bell originally from Segues but appearing also in You Must Revise Your Life) follows Stafford's autobiographical essay and, by its placement, indicates autobiographical concerns. The poem recalls a smalltown memory of racial injustice that reinforces the previous prose account. "Gideon" starts nostalgically enough with the speaker remembering the presumably white druggist "prescribing" Coca-Cola in old-fashioned "tapered glasses." Stafford uses the colon to signal a quiet opening upon memory, onto an emerging realization, perhaps, of precisely when as a boy he first made a public step toward nonconformity, a political step away from the powers-that-be towards the culturally powerless:

Now I remember: in our town the druggist prescribed Coca-Cola mostly, in tapered glasses to us, and to the elevator man in a paper cup, so he could drink it elsewhere because he was black.

Lurking "behind" the elevator man and, at bottom, the prime cause of his servitude are the men in the drugstore's back room: the American Legion veterans, the "old boys" in charge of town politics.

And now I remember The Legion--gambling
in the back room, and no women but girls, old boys
who ran the town. They were generous,
to their sons or the sons of friends.
And of course I was almost one.

The speaker suggests the seductiveness of smalltown acceptance and the resulting power over others like the black elevator man or the "girls" of the back room, neither of whom would ever be regarded as full adults.¹

In the third stanza the speaker surveys his hometown:

I remember winter light closing
its great blue fist slowly eastward
along the street, and the dark then, deep
as war, arched over a radio show
called the thirties in the great old U.S.A.
Look down, stars--I was almost
one of the boys. My mother was folding
her handkerchief; the library seethed and sparked;
right and wrong arced; and carefully
I walked with my cup toward the elevator man.

(Segues 13)

Stafford's skeptical mother figure, so ubiquitous in his poetry, and the "sparkling" library, another recurrent poetic symbol, provide countercurrents of alternative ideas to the violent "great blue fist" of official power and to the monolithic flow of the radio news of the thirties where

¹Ironically, a local American Legion president testified in Stafford's behalf before the local draft board as to Stafford's religious convictions regarding his CO application.

fascists and communists played the villains, and those fighting them became heroes by default. Significantly, Stafford's speaker, much like Stafford the undergraduate at Kansas, moves with his biblical cup overflowing (a reference perhaps to Isaiah's bitter "cup of trembling" or Jesus's cup of pain and death in Gethsemane) towards an empathetic connection with the elevator man; the protest is, characteristically, quiet and humble. Similarly, Stafford's "sit in" at the Kansas student union reads more like a quiet sit-down-with than a full-blown Sixties type of demonstration rife with the possibility of violent reaction and arrests. Stafford always chose the quieter Quaker "middle way" to protest, rejecting the extremes. Still, Stafford's early movement toward peace and racial justice set him off irrevocably from the old boys of heartland America.

"Serving with Gideon's" attitude towards history is consistent with Stafford's own views, given the full context of Stafford's poetry, interviews, and essays. It suggests that the 1930s' concept of history was essentially like a commercial "radio show," simply dramatic advertising. History for Stafford, in other words, becomes whatever the controlling powers say it is dramatically and commercially.

The name "Gideon" in "Serving with Gideon" also offers several related historical ideas. On one level, "Gideon" is apparently the elevator man's name and to the white patrons

probably the only name he would have been known by, not deserving, in effect, the respect of an adult surname. Gideon too, ironically, evokes the Biblical warrior-hero and judge of Israel. In the book of Judges, Gideon the Israelite, though a humble, religious man and reluctant to lead, wins a great victory over the Midianites. In order to demonstrate the power of God, Gideon goes to battle with only 400 handpicked warriors chosen from an army of 33,000 (Achtemeier 347). "Serving with Gideon" thus merges mythical biblical history with the shame of the racist and sexist American present, demanding of its readers a similar examination of allegiances (a favorite Stafford word). For the religious pacifist, only a hand-picked few will be called upon to fight God's "battle". And God's "soldiers" serve an older moral tradition than any set of American smalltown commandments.

"Serving with Gideon" is, furthermore--as the title of its collection implies--a "segue," not only from the poetry of Marvin Bell (Segue's co-author), but to the nameless victims of our century: the targets of discrimination, the dispossessed, the historically forgotten. Most importantly, the poem is an appeal to the goodwill of Stafford's reader. Stafford's attitude here is profoundly religious rather than secular; the Biblical Gideon was honored after his military career as one of the great judges of Israel (Achtemeir 346), implying, perhaps, a judgment apart from or a victory over

secular history (and, in the poem "Gideon," a triumph over sugar water dressed up to sell in attractive "tapered glasses").

Stafford's decision to declare himself a conscientious objector out of religious conviction and subsequently to volunteer for the Civilian Public Service (CPS) program caused him to forthrightly challenge fervently held American attitudes towards history and war. One traditional attitude Stafford found himself at odds with is that there is only one authoritative version of history, that objective "facts" and not subjective interpretation determine the "truth" of history. Other popular American assumptions include the idea that war, when it comes, is by definition an unavoidable national emergency and, therefore, a moral obligation. By extension then, killing in war is not murder but love of country, and, conversely, refusing to fight, displays cowardice and treason. In the "plot" of any given mainstream American history of World War II, for example, American righteousness is assumed because of the treacherous surprise attack on Pearl Harbor and the evil of Nazism. The final "chapter" of the "story" thus will always be the end of the war and the triumph of good. Only the steps or missteps along the way, therefore, might be considered as potentially controversial concerning such a holy crusade.

Another powerful American idea Stafford confronted in early 1942 is the notion that soldiering is the ultimate

crucible of manhood. Going off to fight in a war, thus, has traditionally been the big adventure and test for generations of young men. America in the 1940s overnight became a full-blown war culture, and the definitive history of such a time would be written by the winners of the war--or at least those then in power. Trying to write about and explain the "truth" of pacifism to most Americans of the hot and cold war culture of the last fifty years is like trying to persuade the NRA to turn in its guns and disband because people might get hurt.

Bill Kauffman in his America First! presents a roaming examination of what he sees as the reborn populist movement of the 1990s, particularly in the persons of H. Ross Perot and Patrick Buchanan. Anti-military sentiment--that is, isolationism from all international military commitment--is the central theme of the new populism. Kauffman reminds us that both Washington and Eisenhower, generals who knew the military mind, warned us against a military that might grow too politically powerful. Kauffman points out that America in 1995--despite the end of the Cold War--is still a war culture. We support a "combined military and foreign assistance budget . . . in excess of three hundred billion dollars a year, and we are committed to defending more than forty nations" (18).

Stafford rejects this American war culture wholesale. In fact, his two major poetic themes emerge from his

movement away from mainstream American culture: the transcendental power of the natural world and the destructive folly of human society. Nature triumphs in Stafford's poetry because humanity, though self-important and aggressive, is no real competition. The natural world endures and outlasts. Humanity, on the other hand, suffers and causes suffering because it is incapable of living in harmony with itself in God's world.

Stafford criticism to this point has not focussed on Stafford's poetry as reflecting a Christian pacifist culture that is quietly but firmly opposed to an aggressive, militaristic, and materialistic mainstream American culture. It should. Stafford's pacifist protest is worth hearing, arguing through its consistency that while America has indeed been transformed socially in the post World War II era, it remains an edifice built on the foundation of martial values and sustained by military power.

Poetic Themes and the Major Books

Tracing Stafford's themes from his earliest work reveals his unchanging belief in a core reality that lies underneath the shifting map of American politics and culture. Stafford's early books--West of Your City (1960), Traveling Through the Dark (1962), The Rescued Year (1966), and Allegiances (1970) are located geographically in Kansas, the West, and Northwest. Stafford mentions that the title West of Your City is in fact a reply to Frost's North of

Boston, in the sense that it makes the point that America is more than just New England and the East coast.² Certainly there is a wild natural quality to Stafford's first books that caught the attention of readers and reviewers; here is an America newer and less tamed than the traditional East. It is an America dominated less by crowded cities, rigid convention, and human political power than by open spaces, rivers, mountains, and wind power.

In West of Your City (1960), for example, the reader is pulled tactiley through outdoor adventure: muskrat trapping, setting trotlines, duck hunting, listening in the dark, driving home at night to Kansas, walking "a gray road in the West," wildcats, the killdeer cry, mountains, Oregon country, the gun of Billy the Kid, Grand Prairie, Vermilion, the Barrens, Willa Cather, the Snake River, Bonneville, Sauvies Island, the springs near Hagerman, Highway 40 through Nevada, an oil boom town, and coyotes. There is a sense of freedom and mobility in these early poems. People and landscape sometimes clash, but mostly they co-exist. The talk is casual; the stories are legendary or geological but not historical in the usual formal sense. These are not dramatic or violent poems generally; their allegiances are not to human contention and power but to natural balance and to spirit.

²From a letter to the author dated July 14, 1991.

Always, too, in Stafford's first books are the startling pacifist poems, so different in attitude from the gunslinging Wild West of popular legend. (What attitude, indeed, could be more un-American than pacifism in the West?) In the midst of poems about tumbleweed, deserts, and rivers in West of Your City, we find anti-war poems like "At the Bomb Testing Site" and "Watching the Jet Planes Dive." In poems like "Traveling Through the Dark" and "Late at Night" (from Traveling Through the Dark), we get less didactic, symbolic poems connecting humanity and nature in a frightening, violent darkness. The Rescued Year offers a nostalgic review of midwestern memories and characters, pacifist poems like "Our City Is Guarded by Automatic Rockets," and a section of poems dedicated to the memory of the noted United Nations peacemaker Dag Hammarskjold.

Such pacifist flares going up, though seemingly incongruous, actually fit into Stafford's world view and continue through his later work. Stafford once suggested that "every poem I have ever written is a quiet protest poem" (WTAC 143). Stafford, who likes to refer to himself in interviews, essays, and letters as a Quaker, "the quiet of the land," gently protests in his poetry the arrogant and dangerous abuse of power by a culture with little sense of morality, harmony, or appreciation for a Nature (and he includes human nature) which he regards as sacramental. He also decries those authoritative literary critics who have

stifled natural, original creativity in arbitrary rules and narrow judgments. His various protests are of a piece.

In books like Allegiances (1970) and Someday, Maybe (1973), published amid the tumult of the Civil Rights Movement and the anti-Vietnam War movement, we get poems that not only protest violence, war, and racism, but also offer quietly positive, tentatively hopeful visions of a better culture. Never having felt the need himself to rebel against his parents ("William" 329) and having fully accepted their pacifist outlook, Stafford's "allegiances" are steady and unchanged throughout his work: to family, to the natural world, to God, to reconciliation, and to the power of listening, and to silence.

As companions to Stafford's pacifist poems, there are also those (occurring in each of his books) that suggest various kinds of apocalyptic events, including the Second Coming of Jesus, storms, tornadoes, fires, and nuclear holocaust. It is as if the consequences of hatred, greed, and violence are inexorably leading us to an end of civilization and history. There is a sense too in these poems that there is nothing that people of goodwill can do to prevent this ultimate, permanent judgment; people can only try to live as morally and, therefore, as peaceably as possible.

Much of Stafford's continual struggle with American culture can be located through his attitude towards history,

a view never formulated by Stafford but evidenced by his poetry. In fact, "history"--the word itself--is used repeatedly in his poems and seems to indicate both his preoccupation with living on its fringe and his awareness of its prominence as a force in American culture. The constant battle of the pacifist, after all, is a fight for visibility, for inclusion in history's narrative--a story whose power, Stafford recognizes, transforms America.

In Stories That Could Be True (1977), natural references again abound but in more general terms; and because there are many fewer specific place names and landmarks, the poems are less obviously Western. On the other hand, the poetry is more personal and meditative. Stories in fact--private, abbreviated, personal, even non-human--dominate the landscape with as much validity as history. In some ways, indeed, such stories are more powerful than history because they shape the future of the human imagination; that is, they could become true. Here too, appropriately, are pacifist poems like "My Party the Rain," "At the Un-National Monument Along the Canadian Border," and "Peace Walk," poems that argue the possibility of an end to partisanship and national chauvinism through nonviolent action.

A Glass Face in the Rain (1982) presents more stories, particularly those from childhood about Stafford's father, mother, sister, and brother. His pacifist mother's uniquely

vulnerable view of the world overshadows the book. Nature also tracks along in its own evolving story, unconcerned, though often benevolent of humanity. Pacifist gestures also steadily surface in this retrospective in poems like "How It Is," "What Ever Happened to the Beats?", "My Mother Was a Soldier," and "Things I Learned Last Week." In his late sixties by this time, Stafford, for all of his allegiance to the "now" of the present moment, could not help but look backward.

Smoke's Way: Poems from Limited Editions 1968-1981

(1983) continues Stafford's late urge to collect and sum up his work. Even the earliest poems here from the 1940s and 1950s are recognizably Stafford: reverent of nature and God, calm, yet occasionally apocalyptic. This selection from limited editions and chapbooks reinforces the consistently pacific, spiritual vision of Stafford's work. Choosing the Quaker Way--like smoke's way--involves getting in touch with the flow of the spirit--which may account for the omnipresent force of the wind that blows through Stafford's poetry. Stafford's attention to the processes and cycles of life predispose him to object to the wasteful, artificial mechanisms of war and the senselessness of personal violence. Pacifist poems like "Time Capsule," "Survival," "Mr. Fear," "Terms of Surrender," "Many Things Are Hidden By the Light," and "Saturday Nights" remind us that there are

alternate choices to make even for the most militarily powerful nation in history.

Segues: A Correspondence in Poetry (1983) presents a dialogue of alternating poems between Stafford and Marvin Bell, exemplifying Stafford's lifelong commitment to communication and harmony between individuals. Stafford is noticeably more at ease than Bell in this exchange, perhaps because Stafford's writing method depends upon being so hyper-responsive to signals coming to him anyway. His poetic responses to Bell's poems are quintessential Stafford: optimistic, humble. Instead of assuming that reality is fractured and cruel, Stafford welcomes all versions of life in Segues (even those that could have happened but did not) as being somehow connected to his own story and naturally seguing into God's greater story.

Much of the content of Stafford's poetry in Segues seems to look back to childhood and to those turns in his journey that made a difference. In poems like "It Still Happens Now" and the previously discussed "Gideon," one observes a turning away from mainstream American culture, and elsewhere--in poems like "Living Far Enough Away" and "More Than Words Can Tell"--one finds more apocalyptic visions that suggest a violent end and a final judgement.

An Oregon Message (1987) also revels in childhood; the breathless, almost indefinable present; and in the

apocalyptic future and end to history. In a brief preface, Stafford explains that poetry to him is a sacred event, like a prayer that sometimes gets a hearing:

Each poem is a miracle that has been invited to happen. But these words, after they come, you look at what's there. Why these? Why not some calculated careful contenders? Because these chosen ones must survive as they were made, by the reckless impulse of a fallible but susceptible person. I must be willingly fallible in order to deserve a place in the realm where miracles happen.

Writing poems is living in that realm. (10)

With the Reagan years and the resurgence of a belligerent American patriotism, Stafford must have felt particularly alone--crying from the Oregon wilderness, from the edge of America--declaring that the world is sacred and speaking to us, and that we must listen. Perhaps, too, his authorization of the third printing of Down in My Heart in 1986, his pacifist autobiography about World War II, indicates a growing sense of frustration and alienation. "Confession of an Individual," "Ground Zero," "Graffiti," "For the Unknown Enemy," "Being an American," and "1940" reaffirm Stafford's aversion to war--past, present, and future.

Passwords (1991) contains all the standard Stafford landmarks, remaining faithful to the Quaker "now" of experience, chronicling the slow turn of light and color, the stories from seventy years of living--stories that happened and that could have happened--his family, the bonuses of listening carefully, his losses. One poignant

group of poems under a section titled "Elegies," including "For a Lost Child," "Going On," and "Consolations," may refer to the death by suicide of Stafford's youngest son Brett. The Quaker-like waiting for signals is extended here (to quote a poem title) to "Waiting for God." There is an accelerated sense in Passwords also of Stafford wanting fervently to connect with his "stranger" readers. The pacifist messages within poems are as frequent and as various as ever but perhaps more muted in poems like "Birthdays," "Local Events," "News Every Day," "Five A. M.," "Ground Zero," "Winnemucca, She," "In Camp," and "Something to Declare." Rather than declamations, they are more like the whispered passwords in the night from one frightened person to another, each uncertain whether the other is the enemy, each groping for the right word to save the encounter.

Stafford's last collection, My Name Is William Tell (1992), was awarded a 1992 Western States Book Award and is, like Smoke's Way, a selection of poems from limited edition chapbooks published from 1984 to 1990. Stafford's short preface entitled "Sniffing the Region" discusses his being labeled narrowly as a regional artist:

Being tagged a regional artist doesn't hurt much. Of course the term may imply accomplishment that is worthy only if assessed locally; but being regional may just mean you use references that seem remote and special because the public is elsewhere and hence limited by immersion in a region distinct from the artist's. . . .

To Stafford in fact, any artist has to be local, nosing like a bloodhound on the trail of some enticing scent.

To look up from sniffing, in order to find a critic's approval or a public's taste, is to forsake the trail. And that trail is one-person wide, terribly local and provincial: art is absolutely individual in a non-forensic but utterly unyielding way.

Anyone actually doing art needs to maintain this knack for responding to the immediate, the region; for that's where art is. (xiii)

Stafford refused to accept his culture's truth, preferring to discover his own version for himself, and this unwillingness to perceive America as a country founded, led, and preserved by "heroes" gave him a vision of the nation which, if not objectively true, was certainly significantly different. Art, to Stafford, therefore, if not true to the inherent originality of the artist, is not worthy of the name.

CHAPTER 2

DOWN IN MY HEART: A PACIFIST'S WAR

Down in My Heart, originally Stafford's master's thesis from the University of Kansas (and first published in 1947 by the Brethren Press), is a collection of episodic sketches introduced by poems and based on his conscientious objector experience in Civilian Public Service. Heart presents, like "Serving With Gideon," a history that confounds the usual concept of history.

The amalgam of ideas under the broad label of New Historicism is helpful in considering Stafford's experience as a CO in the context of his postwar memoir. Robert Con Davis describes the goal of the traditional historical approach to literature as essentially "to cast light on and clarify the text itself" (105). This method traditionally involves an analysis of the history of the artist (i.e. literary biography) and the study of a work's historical setting and allusions to better understand such history's effect upon a literary work. The traditional student of literature, therefore, must first study *History*, "the virtual master text" (105). Jean Howard sums up this long-held attitude towards the relationship between history and

literature as being based on three assumptions: 1) "that history is knowable"; 2) "that literature mirrors or at least by indirection reflects historical reality"; and 3) "that historians and critics can see the facts of history objectively" (18). New Historians challenge all of these assumptions.

Michel Foucault, French journalist, historian, and philosopher, whose writings provide some of the bases for New Historicism, contends that history is not an objective rendering of the past at all, but exists only as a text and is, therefore, subjective. Furthermore, since such a text is by its nature a complexity of entangled cultural ideas struggling for "factual" supremacy, then essentially the "truth" of history reflects the subjective dominant viewpoint of that particular cultural period or "episteme" (Bressler 132). History is thus subjective, cultural, and--because it shapes our perception of reality--primarily a form of "power." If, indeed, history is simply just another cultural text, then not only does literature not subserviently mirror some objective historical reality (*mimesis*), but it actually participates in affecting or even producing historical narrative (White 1-2). In other words, the old distinction between non-fiction and fiction is blurred under New Historicism.

Down in My Heart is a prime example of a cultural text that uses literary means to vie for the status of history.

Although Heart was never reviewed and only occasionally mentioned by critics during his lifetime, it was important to Stafford.³ In the Foreword to the 1985 edition, he not only describes Heart's personal significance relating to his crucial decision to be a CO, but also explains that it makes an important, albeit small pacifist historical comment on wartime American culture, a comment still valid he believes in 1985 after forty years of Cold War:

To me the book is a distanced object, a curiosity. But it has meaning, I think. At least it is a war relic, or a peace relic. And here it is, unchanged, offered as it was published in 1947, and reprinted in an ambiguous time. (DIMH 4)

Undoubtedly Heart is a "peace relic," concerned as it is with the unique wartime pacifist community of Civilian Public Service. Pacifism in America, however, is hardly "normative," so Heart is also a "war relic" since World War II subsumed every aspect of American culture. The only reason, obviously, for such an entity as CPS even to exist was the war, and thus the very identities of the CO's involved were inextricably linked to the conflict. In fact, the only way that Stafford could make the essentially alien Heart understandable to the average American of the last fifty years was to present a synthesis of his and others' experiences in a form that parallels a recognizable war

³Jeff Gundy's essay on Down in My Heart appears in On William Stafford (1993), forty-six years after Heart was first published and only months before Stafford's death. It is the first published commentary on the book.

story, and because the men in CPS were also drafted into the Selective Service and sent away from their families, these men shared similar experiences and emotions.

In a modest challenge to the popular versions of World War II, Stafford and his publisher The Brethren Press resorted to some interesting marketing strategies. The 1985 "unchanged" edition, as Stafford describes it, is a reprint of the 1947 version of Down in My Heart--except for the addition of a Foreword, a new cover, and the omission of an epigraph. The new cover of the 1985 edition particularly presents an interesting re-packaging of an old product. The cover features a black and white, newly presented old photograph, showing the young CO Stafford posing in front of a dilapidated CPS barracks (probably a Civilian Conservation Corps structure from the 1930s since most of the CPS camps were originally CCC structures). The sturdy young man pictured seems bemused at being photographed, particularly in his CO "uniform" of t-shirt and rolled-up, torn, baggy pants, and old tennis shoes. One is reminded of the raffish Walt Whitman posing on the cover of his original Leaves of Grass.

By the time of the 1985 edition, however, William Stafford was not an unknown poet anymore but a seventy-one-year-old world famous author, and this wartime picture, together with his name, markedly changes the effect of the original 1947 edition from a kind of anonymous eyewitness-

to-history, to the first book of a prominent author. In addition, the cover suggests that the manuscript within is somehow an explanation of where the renowned poet came from and how he arrived. The intriguing "new" cover with the famous name and featuring the suffering young man (Down in My Heart--"down on my luck"--Down and Out in London and Paris) might cause potential buyers to flip to the back cover in order to understand the context of the unusual picture joined with the familiar reputation.

On the back cover, beside a small picture of Stafford at 71 (immediately recognizable as the older version of the young man on the cover), is a blurb from the poet William Everson, also a former CO, extolling this (suddenly marketable) new-old book as a work with

an autobiographical dimension, a shy but brave sense of quest, of inner evolution, of maturation and growth from eager idealism at the beginning to ironic wariness verging on disillusionment at the close, that was so telling a measure for all of us who shared the CO experience. But Stafford registers a feeling of absolute integrity within a situation of social alienation that is extraordinary, the more so because it is unconscious, emerging as the subsumed virtue of the work. In the quiet immediacy of his prose the future poet is alive and breathing. All in all, a perceptive glimpse into a most painful interval of our national life.

Stafford and Everson (formerly Brother Antoninus) became aware of each other as CO's.⁴ Later, in 1967 Stafford

⁴Stafford states in a letter to this writer, dated August 25, 1990, that "Everson and I were not ever in camp together, though we knew about each other; he was in Waldport (in Oregon) while I was in Belden (in northern California). Because he was

wrote a laudatory introduction for a collection of Brother Antoninus's poetry titled The Achievement of Brother Antoninus. Underneath these florid Everson compliments on Heart's back cover, someone has written (with some inaccuracy) a brief summary of Stafford's life and accomplishments and a few lines about Heart itself:

From 1940 to 1944 [the actual dates were 1942-1946], William Stafford was interned in the camps for conscientious objectors in the United States. As a pacifist, he worked for the Civilian Public Service on forest and soil conservation projects in Arkansas, California, and Illinois. As a writer, he recorded the life he found there; the fellowship within the camps and the antagonism outside them. Down in My Heart is an account of the relationships among the people in the camps, their day-to-day activities: fighting forest fires, building roads, terracing eroded lands, and their earnest pursuit of a social morality rooted in religious and secular pacifist ideals.

The attractive cover framed in tasteful black and red, along with the back cover applauding the author's humility, taken together, not only makes the reprinted product more saleable, but has the effect of aligning the first-person narrator more closely with Stafford himself, making the narrator more a focus of the narrative than previously. Heart's original 1947 cover actually appears inside the 1985 edition as the backdrop for the new 1985 title page and presents a vague, photographic negative of a rugged mountain CPS camp where evil and good, black and white, presumably,

involved in arts, as I was, we no doubt appeared in some CO publications together--newsletters and literary magazines published from the camps."

get confused and inverted. The title page outlines the sense of the physical and moral isolation the men there endured.

Furthermore, we might speculate from Stafford's remark in the Foreword about how Heart was being "reprinted in an ambiguous time" (1985) that Stafford had been waiting years for the right historical moment and audience for Heart's pacifist viewpoint. Indeed, Heart was reprinted once before in 1971, twenty-four years after its original publication, doubtless coinciding with the anti-Vietnam War movement and probably meant to present a pacifist alternative to the violent demonstrations that Stafford abhorred ("William" 337). In 1985, at the time of the nuclear freeze movement and Lebanon, he must have felt that the atmosphere was again right to receive this unchanging pacifist message.

The one omission from the 1947 first edition in the 1985 version is intriguing. It is a quotation from an English philosopher Bernard Bosanquet that appears by itself on the facing page to the Introduction:

To
The Kingdom

All that we mean by the Kingdom of God on earth is the society of human beings who have a common life and are working for a common social good. The Kingdom of God has come on earth in every civilized society where men live and work together doing their best for the whole society and for mankind.

Bosanquet, a nineteenth century English scientist and Christian thinker, felt that an international Christian

movement to redress social evils would be Christ's way of bringing "the Kingdom of God to earth" (64). Those working in the Kingdom--for the Kingdom--were a select few, as Stafford intimates in his "Acknowledgments" disclaimer on the last page of Heart:

All incidents are based on fact; most characters are readily identifiable by men who served in the program. I have, however, changed chronology and names, because experience in our program would be considered prejudicial in some instances, perhaps, by persons outside the Kingdom. (DIMH 96)

Stafford's 1947 "To the Kingdom" Bosanquet quotation might have been left out unintentionally (the page in the 1985 edition is blank). The quotation, though, clearly has the effect of Stafford speaking more to an audience of Christian insiders of the "Kingdom" than to a more secular, neutral audience. Leaving the quotation out might have been calculated to appeal to a more mainstream audience. Certainly educating uninitiated Americans about CPS pacifism (whether the religious or the political brand) was a goal of the widely known poet of the 1985 edition and his Brethren editors.

Thus, to make a New Historical point, "history," as represented in Stafford's 1947 text, is a fiction that has changed remarkably over forty-odd years when one considers the timing of the editions, the sporadic anti-war mood of America, and the new packaging of this pacifist product. Emerging information about stories like the internment of Japanese-Americans in California, the firebombing of German

and Japanese cities, and the dropping of the atomic bombs also have helped nudge a text like Heart further out into the historical mainstream. Yet while Heart's reception has depended upon the historical context of the moment of re-publication, to Stafford its pacifist message is unchanging. This pacifism (to paraphrase Joseph Campbell) is the unmoving hub of the wildly spinning wheel of Stafford's life; Heart symbolizes the personal decision that reflects the stable core of the man and the poet.

In his 1985 foreword to Heart, Stafford presents the difficulties of the international pacifist position:

Back then--and now--one group stays apart from the usual ways of facing war. They exist now--and they did then--in all countries. Those who refuse the steps along that way are a small group, and their small role is a footnote in the big histories. . . . (DIMH 3)

The "steps along the way" refer to the pacifist contention (as Stafford implies in "Serving With Gideon") that war is the result of the failure of individual human relationships and the individual conscience, largely because of bigotry, group mentality, and governmental propaganda (Eller 159). War, from this standpoint, is not caused exclusively by the history-book "larger forces" of politics, economics, or religion. Indeed, the usual sweep of history rarely recognizes war on the personal level in causal terms: civilians and soldiers alike are typically described in anecdotes as either victims or pawns of powerful forces and as such can only make choices on a survival level. To the

pacifist, war and the steps leading to it are rather matters of personal choice and moral responsibility.

Stafford sees pacifists as people who have a "role" to play in history, though the "big histories" have barely recognized their existence. Rather than being left outside of history, Stafford sees himself and other pacifists as an invisible but constant undercurrent to history's story:

During the war years we who openly objected and refused to participate often felt alone, and said goodbye and went away to camp or to prison. Some twelve thousand of us draft age went into the alternative service program called Civilian Public Service; some five thousand were sent to prison; and some unspecified thousands went into noncombatant service with the armed forces.
(DIMH 7)

Civilian Public Service (CPS) was a program (1940-1947) to provide a means--in theory--for conscientious objectors "to do work of national importance under civilian control" under the auspices of the Selective Service Board.

The bare statistical facts about the program are clear. The actual number of CO's involved, for example, pales before the total number registered under Selective Service. Of the 34,506,923 American men registered under the draft during World War II, only 72,354 applied for conscientious objector status. Of those applying, about 25,000 chose noncombatant service, usually in the Medical Corps or Army Corps of Engineers. Approximately 27,000 failed the induction physical, 6,086 were imprisoned for complete refusal of the conscription laws (4,441 of these were

Jehovah's Witnesses) and just 11,996 qualified for the alternative of Civilian Public Service (Keim 8).

Most of the CPS camps were administered and run by the three Historic Peace Churches: The Society of Friends, the Mennonite Church, and the Church of the Brethren.

Overseeing the work and direction of the camps was the National Service Board for Religious Objectors (NSBRO) which was sponsored by a quilt of pacifist organizations including the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC), the War Resisters League (WRL), and the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR). Gradually, however, as the war progressed, the Selective Service Board began to dominate the administration of the camps (Keim 3-4).

As Stafford indicates in his foreword to Heart, there are few references or even "footnotes" to the Civilian Public Service program in the various "big" or little histories of World War II. In chronicling the massive American war effort, mainstream historians have given little space to the moral protest of only 12,000 men. Indeed, the only way that CPS is usually mentioned at all is as a minor statistical category in an account of the Selective Service or occasionally in a book section about the "homefront." After all, it has only been since the 1980s that the scandal of Japanese-American internment has been given full attention by journalists and historians, and that particular unconstitutional political imprisonment involved over

100,000 American citizens. Stafford, therefore, has to begin the original 1947 Heart by explaining what CPS was, since few contemporary readers would even know of its existence.

It is undeniable that to most historians of World War II--and nearly all Americans--the moral justification for fighting the war was, and is, unambiguous. The surprise attack on Pearl Harbor ended the powerful isolationist "America First" movement, for example, in a matter of hours. To most Americans, the Empire of Japan and Adolf Hitler personified evil; therefore, any moral objection to American involvement ignored both that evil and the common defense. The typical war historian especially--a student after all of naked political and military power--would have little interest in a tiny group of pacifists who were so remarkably without influence or power. On the other hand, if the young Stafford on the cover of Down in My Heart had worn a 45 caliber pistol on his belt, we would recognize him immediately as a man of his historical hour.

Foucault would have understood Stafford's problem of how to effectively historicize pacifism when mainstream historical texts revolve around the politics of overt and covert warfare. Foucault, in analyzing Clausewitz's famous axiom that "war is politics continued by other means," derives three implications (90). While it is true that politics may eventually halt any particular war one way or

another, to Foucault, such "political power," in effect, simply reinscribes a "form of unspoken warfare" in "social institutions, in economic inequalities, in language, in the bodies themselves of each and everyone of us" (91). The second inference Foucault makes from Clausewitz's axiom is that a "civil peace" as established by political power is nothing but "the continuation of war" (91). To Foucault, "even when one writes the history of peace and its institutions, it is always the history of this war that one is writing" (91). Foucault's third derivation from Clausewitz is apocalyptic: "The political battle would cease with this final [armed] battle. Only a final battle of that kind would put an end, once and for all to the exercise of power as continual war" (91).

Foucault's sense of history, thus, is built on the view that "power is war" and power creates a culture's truth. For Stafford then, by extrapolation, a history of peace--and thus of powerlessness--can only be outlined as a kind of photographic negative of the history of power, of war. A peace history like Down in My Heart must inevitably be a shadow history.

In some ways Heart appears to be a recognizable, conventional, anecdotal memoir of an interesting though obscure wartime experience. Stafford as "witness" to this piece of "history" is unquestionably knowledgeable and perceptive about CPS, having worked four years in four

different camps in the South, West, and Midwest. In addition, as Heart shows (and later remarks by Stafford reveal), a network of correspondence was established among the "campers" so that Stafford knew fairly well what was going on with other CO's around the country. Furthermore, Stafford wrote Heart soon after the end of the war, rather than many years later after memories had faded, and he tells us in his Foreword that this "odd bit of history" was produced in the main "from letters and diary notes kept during four years in camps . . . (DIMH 4). One might imagine, therefore, that his fresh, well-documented memories would be potentially more reliable than some historical accounts and less subject, in theory, to conscious or unconscious mistakes or inflated, self-serving revisionism.

But Stafford's Heart is not "objective history" at all in any traditional sense. Heart is rather another "story" that, in New Historical terms, competes with other more mainstream stories about history and interconnects with the culture of the 1940s. Heart is a self-conscious "blending" of the "rivers" of fact, fiction, poetry, and rumor to produce what Stafford calls an "account . . . purposely planned to give the texture of our lives" (10). This pacifist "texture" is what Stafford is true to, as he is true to his pacifist philosophy that war is evil and can serve no good end. This is a philosophy, however, out of time and abstracted from standard conceptions of history.

Certainly Down in My Heart is less and more than a "memoir of a major American poet" as the back cover of the 1985 edition broadcasts. As memoir, we might expect Heart's narrative to be somewhat bound by chronology and faithful to factual, usually witnessed experience. Yet at least two major events in Stafford's life during the war years are omitted from Heart: the death of Stafford's father from an accident in 1942 and Stafford's courtship and marriage to Dorothy Hope Frantz in 1944. From Stafford's postwar remarks and writings, it would be difficult to locate more significant events in his life. Stafford's "memoir," thus becomes less as a chronicle but more as a skillful explanation of and apology for pacifism to an uncomprehending American audience.

Another way to look at Heart is as a work of a so-called "original historian." Hayden White quotes Hegel's description of an original historian as one who works like a poet and whose aim is "to make a lifelike 'image' of the events [known] at first hand or on adequate authority." Such an historian, like Stafford in Heart, uses fictional license and is not, in Hegel's definition, subject to usual modern historical criticism (and, in fact, rejects it). Hegel valued such historians, suggesting that "'their works represent a form of historiography that is both a history and an original document of the times in which they were written'" (98).

Certainly Heart's episodic arrangement is carefully (and ironically) plotted. If it fits a genre at all, Heart might best be read as the shadow of a soldier's novel--with comradeship, humorous incidents, dramatic and dangerous action with harrowing escapes, boredom, heroism, physical and emotional suffering, and finally the end of the war and "peacetime." Unfortunately, for the lifelong pacifist, such a peacetime is simply--as Foucault describes it--a continuation of war by other means.

Almost immediately in Heart's Introduction, Stafford's story about CO's shifts ironically to the language of conflict and to the rhetoric of the powerless in the face of authority:

Those of us [CO's] who objected openly found our country conquered overnight--conquered by aliens who could shout on any corner or in any building and bring down on us wrath and hate more intense than on any foreigner. The country we had known was gone, had completely disappeared, was wiped out in a bombing that obliterated landmarks which had stood for years--since long before we were born. (DIMH 7)

As Heart's plot develops, we begin to realize that we are reading a text that similarly clings to the new "landmarks" of the American war culture and thus becomes an "alternative" war novel, a story stream running faithfully parallel to the mainstream war experience, adopting its language and rhetoric, employing some of the very martial values it rejects. Heart is at once a subversive text and a gentle parody that occasionally collapses in on itself in

poignancy. A story of history gets told in Heart, but the product is to most readers, as Stafford would put it, "alien."

Heart's story proper begins with a "Prologue" which is actually the end of the novel's plot, suggesting a circular struggle beginning predictably and ending ambiguously. The first-person, nameless narrator is speaking to "George," one of the central characters who lies in bed in the darkness: "I'll just sit here by your bed, George, and talk to you quietly tonight . . . I don't know whether you can hear me or not, but I'll talk along anyway, in hope" (DIMH 11). We guess at this point that George is in a coma. Stafford's second person "you," so common in his poetry, shifts possibly in the second paragraph from the specific George to include the reader as well: "It's getting dark outside; you can hardly see the trees along the drive now, and the lamps near the gate are on" (DIMH 11).

We surmise from the full context of Heart, and hints here, that George is probably in a prison hospital on a hunger strike. Indeed, we find out at the end of Heart that George has previously gone AWOL from a CPS camp, deliberately choosing non-cooperation with the war effort and thus inviting arrest and federal prison. This opening scene takes place after the end of the war, and the narrator wants George to look back with him on their wartime experience together which step by step brought them to this

point: the narrator a free man and George dying in prison.

The "war" for the pacifist, however, and to Foucault, goes on even after the armed conflict ceases. From Foucault's perspective, bourgeois surveillance and political incarceration are simply a continuation of the war on the people (18). The alarming idea that a hospital, the benign symbol of the medical community, could be involved in fascist repression and control--another Foucault notion (159)--would seem fantastic to most Americans. Yet we get the idea in the Prologue that though the medical authorities do not quite know what to make of George's fasting, they force-feed him to keep him alive. The effect is considerably softened in the narrator's account in Heart: "If you [George] would only eat--but I won't say anything about that. The man [in charge of the floor] said they were giving you just enough to keep you going--but I won't say any more about it" (11).

Eyewitness accounts of the force-feeding of fasting CO's in federal prisons reveal a level of vindictiveness and control of the body that Foucault would recognize as a "micro-power" of fascist culture (101); the bourgeois culture itself, in other words, employs its many institutions to control the populace or conspires to have its members control each other. A prison drawing by the co Lowell Naeve shows the force-feeding of a CO during a hunger strike in Danbury Federal Prison in 1943 to protest the

racial segregation of the dining hall. The sketch shows four men pressing down a man who is lying on a bed in a strait-jacket. Another man is holding up a large container of liquid whose tube has been shoved up the "patient's" nose (Cooney and Michalowski 106). The successful "Danbury Strike" of 135 days inspired CO's in other federal prisons to also protest prison segregation (107).

Stafford's scene of the unconscious George possibly on his deathbed suggests none of these coercions and physical beatings--and concentrates instead on paralleling the more readily recognizable and heroic image of a soldier-hero dying in a darkened hospital ward with his comrade-in-arms by his side. Stafford offers not only a critique of martial heroism, but in George he presents an alternative, the pacifist as hero-activist. George and others like him "in all countries" (DIMH 3) will not remain impassive to war, and have traditionally risked imprisonment and death in non-violent protest. Heart, thus, establishes itself immediately as a comrade's history, an insider's history told as a way to sort out some kind of historical meaning--or create it whole cloth. Other readers also--and those not necessarily opposed to war--might be included in this search for history as well, simply because of the compelling drama of a young man dying.

Although Jeff Gundy sees George, the radical pacifist, as the center of the action and views the narrator as mostly

"observer," the quiet narrator is the real protagonist of Heart. The narrator's importance lies specifically in his historical mobility. Less character than collective memory, the narrator becomes an historical conduit for the many anonymous voices of the men of CPS. Sifting through the biases and dominant ideas of the time, the narrator serves as a fictional double of a "normal" historian. Apologist, explainer, and moral thinker, he assembles the collective voices of this unknown history, gently persuading us of the humanity and courage of men "exiled" in their own country. As historian, novelist, and poet, Stafford is less concerned with political argument and factual detail than with emotional validity. Ultimately, Stafford's Heart is interested in the possibility of humanity's reconciliation with itself and with nature--and thus with God; and this reconciliation can be accomplished, not through logic alone, but through the sympathies of the heart.

Heart as war(-peace) novel as history-creating-itself-as-fiction, finally begins (after these various careful, expository preludes) its first and most dramatic chapter, "The Mob Scene at McNeil." In this chapter, set in the tiny Arkansas town of McNeil, the narrator, George, and Bob, who have been working in a nearby CPS camp in Magnolia, are nearly lynched as spies and saboteurs by patriotic townspeople on a lazy Sunday afternoon in March 1942.

This chapter dramatizes the chasm between the pacifist culture and the emerging 1942 American war culture. While the pacifist world mirrors much of the American war world--and is recognizable, therefore, by all sorts of readers--it inverts the reflection: left becomes right, courage looks like cowardice. Although there are many kinds of pacifists, and those who might choose to participate or even fight in a particular war if the morality of doing so outweighed the evil of killing, most pacifists affirm peace and oppose war in the long term, refusing as invalid the short term excuses for war. Lifelong pacifists, whether religiously or politically inspired, view theories about the causes of a particular war as hopelessly abstract and impersonal.

To cite a random example, a 1991 high school history textbook entitled The American Pageant exemplifies this traditional attitude towards the causes of war. In a feature called "Varying Viewpoints," Thomas Bailey and David Kennedy examine the shifting attitudes towards appeasement in World War II (835). The authors note that "many historians" believe that World War II could have been prevented if the isolationist United States government had involved itself more in world affairs, a familiar refrain today in light of Korea, Vietnam, the Gulf War, and Bosnia; that is, American political and military involvement can prevent bigger wars. A popular view, therefore, argues that had the United States not embargoed oil to Japan, war might

have been avoided (Bailey 836). To the pacifist, however, such short-term tactical moves are almost always too impersonal and too late to prevent war. Many pacifists believe that America routinely goes to war because war is an integral part of our political-cultural heritage; while we describe ourselves to other nations as peace-loving, we also fancy ourselves a warrior nation, and war-making becomes simply another political option for vengeance or punishment. War offers a simple way to put the values of our democracy into action, becomes a self-righteous opportunity to "reluctantly" flex our military might and thereby reflect our supposed "moral" hegemony. In a war culture, conflict is no tragedy, but is simply an exercise of power over other cultures and one's own citizens.

Stafford's goal in Heart is to somehow make palatable the premise that the belligerent use of power destroys freedom rather than defends it. Chapter One proper of Heart is introduced by some italicized dialogue, a kind of epigraph (Foreword, Introduction, Prologue, epigraph--much conventional preparation is needed to understand a new world view). This epigraph recreates the CPS barrack banter in which the CO's try to anticipate their reaction to the real possibility of getting lynched by locals. Jeff Gundy suggests that this dialogue displays the wide variety of pacifists in the CPS program (96):

"When the mob comes," George would say, "I think we should try surprising them with a

friendly reaction--take coffee and cookies out and meet them."

"As for me," Larry would say, "I'll take a stout piece of wood, and stand behind the door, and deal out many a lumpy head--that's what they'd need."

"Well, I don't know about you all," Dick would say, "but I intend to run right out of that back door and hide in the brush--'cause I don't want my death on any man's conscience." (DIMH 13)

George, the non-violent activist, therefore, plans to literally "disarm" the mob by going out to greet it bearing gifts and goodwill like the biblical Jacob to his brother Esau or the Pope to the conquering Hannibal. Larry, on the other hand, will deal out blow for blow while Dick runs for his life.

The men see the black humor involved in trying to act idealistically in the face of mob violence. The three different reactions also have in common a well-considered regard for the humanity of the people in the "mob." Even Larry half-jokingly asserts that the individuals in such a mob will "need" some sense knocked into them. Many pacifists desire to act, not as isolated individuals, but as thoughtful representatives of humankind and in its service.

Violent societal reaction, as demonstrated in this exchange, must be thoroughly considered on a personal level by each pacifist before it occurs in order to achieve a disciplined response. Pacifists know that they are in a sense constantly "at war" with war and, therefore, with everyday people who are to some extent controlled by cultural propaganda. Pacifists know they must be prepared

to defend their position in argument and may suffer unpredictably for their beliefs. This barracks talk serves to ease the non-pacifist reader gently towards some understanding of the disparate pacifist culture; its appeal lies partially in its self-deprecating, very American humor and also in its strange evocation of soldiers and battle. The men's dialogue parallels that of new soldiers nervously talking before a battle, trying to sort out their feelings and predict their reactions to violence. The options, of course, for both soldier and pacifist are limited and unsatisfactory: one must either stand and fight and maybe die, confront the enemy and surrender, or run for dear life.

This repartee on the eve of battle recalls a scene like that in Stephen Crane's war novel The Red Badge of Courage, another work of fiction-as-history, mistakenly read by many Civil War veterans as written by a fellow veteran. The dialogue in Heart recalls the night before Henry Fleming's first battle when he and other untested soldiers talk excitedly or suffer in silence thinking about how they might react to battle; Henry, of course, is afraid he might run.⁵

⁵The 1949 John Huston film version of The Red Badge of Courage extends the novel's determined foray into fiction-as-history even further by employing Audie Murphy, the most decorated American veteran of World War II, as the coward-turned-hero Henry Fleming. One can only imagine the 1949 American audience reaction to watching a figure out of history represent a film character from literature. Audie Murphy was an American hero in search of the appropriate post-war American myth whether in the Huston-Crane version of the Civil War or in forgettable Westerns--Murphy even played himself in To Hell and Back. So rather than history serving as a "real" story for art to draw upon, the stuff of history itself searches for

To the pacifists in the CPS camp, however, their own courage or cowardice does not alter the moral rightness of opposing war. Whether pacifists stand or flee, to their thinking, their cause is righteous.

In the town of McNeil, Arkansas, the pacifist world appeals for a (peaceful) niche in space within small-town America, within the world and history of deep South Arkansas, and within the on-going history of America in World War II. The CO's lose their argument, predictably, almost immediately. The cultures are too alien. We get instead a rare account of a near-lynching from "the subject's point of view" (DIMH 15), truly a unique alternative historical perspective in the history of lynching. Lynching, of course, was the famous historical Southern remedy for Blacks who refused to accept their proper place, having committed real or imagined crimes against whites.

In fact, the narrator tells us that the Magnolia Camp CO's had already challenged the condescending custom of whites calling black adults by their first names (only a few men in CPS were black); the CO's used "Mr. and Mrs" instead. The narrator recalls further that "one stormy night when no doctors would come out, some of the men in camp had given first aid to a Negro woman, whose husband had led them

"meaning" in the aesthetic unity of art.

through the dark woods to the cabin where the woman lay screaming" (DIMH 14). Such actions were tantamount to declaring war on small-town, deep South racial politics.

"When are men dangerous?" Stafford's narrator repeatedly asks (DIMH 13). "Most of the time," would seem the reply. The McNeil incident begins with George, Bob, and the narrator lounging around the town depot on a Sunday afternoon. Bob painting a picture of an old building draws a curious group. After some cordial talk, the townspeople discover that the three men are CO's, and one angry citizen reads a poem George is writing that unfortunately begins with "'McNeil! Hmph! Some town, McNeil . . .' " (DIMH 19). Discontent among the townspeople escalates, a larger crowd gathers, "yellow" and "damn" are muttered. Someone snatches Bob's drawing board, considers tearing it up or smashing it over a metal rail, and then decides to save it instead for "evidence." The predicted yet unexpected threat of violence soon materializes: "'We ought to break that board over their heads,' someone suggested Some spoke of 'stringing them up'" (DIMH 17). Meanwhile, the narrator's copy of Leaves of Grass and a personal letter are confiscated by the townspeople while someone calls the sheriff (DIMH 18).

Members of the crowd, fast becoming a dangerous mob, ask George and Bob the purpose of writing poetry and painting an old building. In the midst of these questions, the crowd also attempts to make George explain why he is a

pacifist (DIMH 18). While Stafford always contends that art and politics are different "streams," the suggestion here is that the two activities spring from the same free and freeing well. To Stafford, military conscription restricts the free human state of the citizen just as artistic censorship or "rules" inhibit the artist. There are many ways to serve one's country and many ways to do art. One becomes free, Stafford would argue, whether politically or artistically, by fearlessly exercising choice and accepting unpredictable consequences.

In this comical, dangerous, absurd incident (or parable?), small-town America cannot decide whether to smash to pieces the unpatriotic "pacifist art" or tag it for evidence and lynch its creators. The mob offers a kind of traditional biographical criticism--at its deadliest--of these articles; in other words, it projects a hatred of the trio's traitorous pacifism onto their works of art. One man, after discovering that George is a CO, somehow extracts subversive "information" (19) about "troop trains" from a line of George's innocuous poem: "'And loaded freighters grumble through the night'" (DIMH 19). Another patriotic citizen decides that Bob's painting of an "old store building" must be "for a foreign power" (DIMH 19). In protest, Bob insists that "he painted for fun." George also defends his own inflammatory "blunderbuss of a poem" by

explaining that "he was just trying to write, trying to express his own feelings" (DIMH 19).

After a policeman and a "federal revenue man" arrive to calm the crowd about the three "spies," the CO's are driven back to camp. The narrator's copy of The Leaves of Grass and his camera are eventually returned, but, ludicrously, "the picture, the poem, and . . . letter . . . were placed on exhibit at the Magnolia police station to satisfy inquirers that all precautions were being taken" (DIMH 21). Like soldiers under siege, the CO's at the Magnolia Camp "doubled the night watch" against the possibility of mob attack by the townspeople.

The picture, the poem, and the letter are, in effect, censored by the local government (that is, the sheriff) in order to "protect" their authors from the citizenry and presumably to keep the works themselves from being destroyed (burned by American "Nazis"?). The impulse and ability of such politically powerless pacifists to do art and to write is perhaps the real "alien" act, even aside from refusing to fight in a patriotic war. Ironically, from the longer viewpoint of history, all three creative "works," in conjunction with their individual artistic or literary merits, would have been historically archival of McNeil during the war years, i.e. valuable historical "texts" about a way of life, rather than "evidence" to convict their authors. Art and intellectualism particularly, when not in

the obvious service of the war effort--or anything else more concrete than emotional truth, beauty, or play--become politically subversive acts.

We might suppose, incidentally, that the narrator's letter (written but not mailed) could have clinched the men's Sabbath lynching, but we never find out its contents. Yet since we are told that the letter is read by members of the mob, we might infer that, unlike George's poem, it does not insult the state of Arkansas, the town of McNeil, or its citizens, or seem to somehow aid the enemy. Since the narrator earlier, unassumingly, had engaged citizens in talk, we might guess further that the letter may have been respectful of McNeil. To a Christian pacifist like Stafford, goodwill towards people on a Sunday, or on any other day, is a matter of the thorough transformation of the heart.

Interestingly, the three CO's are initially saved by what we would recognize now as a non-violent reaction to provocation:

During all this heckling and crowding we were merely quiet and respectful. We didn't know what else to do. We learned then rapidly what we later learned about other provokers--including policemen--that almost always the tormentor is at a loss unless he can provoke a belligerent reaction as an excuse for further pressure or violence. (19-20)

Many CPS men were familiar with Richard Gregg's The Power of Non-Violence (1934) which introduced Western readers to the practical aspects of Gandhian nonviolence. Through the

efforts of pacifists like A. J. Muste, the more radical CPS men not only began employing "coercive non-violence" to witness their anti-war stance (many going to federal prison for it), but also (like George in Heart), began fasting in protest against issues like racial segregation in Federal prisons (Zeitzer 82). Indeed, in 1942, Muste, along with young pacifists like George Houser and Bayard Rustin, began the Congress for Racial Equality (CORE) in Chicago as an "experiment" to apply non-violence to the Civil Rights struggle (82).

At the end of Chapter One, the CO's of the Magnolia Camp, in typical pacifist fashion, thoroughly discuss the dangerous incident at McNeil to learn from it. The camp director, "a slow-talking preacher of the way of life taught by Jesus Christ" sums up the experience for the CO's:

"I know you men think the scene was funny, in spite of its danger; and I suppose there's no harm in having fun out of it; but don't think our neighbors here in Arkansas are hicks just because they see you as spies and dangerous men. Just remember that our government is spending millions of dollars and hiring the smartest men in the country to devote themselves full time just to make everyone act that way." (22)

While we today might think the townspeople of McNeil were simply ignorant for so easily transforming the Magnolia pacifists into foreign spies, actually, as the camp director points out, America's obsession with fifth columnists was characteristic of the 1930s and 1940s and makes the McNeil paranoia entirely comprehensible.

Lee Kennett in his For the Duration . . . The United States Goes to War methodically documents the 1942 American homefront and notes that Americans' fears about a Japanese invasion of the West Coast were only matched in intensity by wilder fears about their own neighbors being Axis spies and saboteurs. Kennett suggests that American hysteria about "the Enemy Within" had invested the country through a mixture of journalism, literature, radio, and film. Many Americans remembered actual and mythical exploits of World War I sabotage by the "Kaiser's secret agents" and confused the two. In the 1930s, "the Spanish Civil War contributed both the phrase 'fifth column' and the notion of an internal enemy poised to create panic, doubt, and confusion--all in perfect coordination with forces attacking from the outside" (62).

By March of 1942, many Americans were certain (without any basis in fact) that early Nazi success in the invasions of Poland, Scandinavia, and especially France had at least as much to do with fifth-column "quislings" as with military tactics and Allied blunders (Kennett 63). American government on every level seemed eager to believe in a campaign of foreign subversion. For example, before Pearl Harbor the Office of Naval Intelligence saw the possibility of Japanese-American saboteurs and spies around the Bremerton, Washington Naval Base and "along the coast of

Alaska" (Kennett 64). Similarly, the Army had its East Coast 1940 "Counter Fifth Column Plan." The plan

. . . spoke of "possible measures of local counter-intelligence and of infiltration into local groups," and a notation on the memo suggested that efforts be concentrated on large cities with heavy populations of "foreign [particularly German] descent." (Kennett 65)

The FBI, however, under Hoover took the lead in spy chasing:

By March, 1942 it [the Bureau] had a contact man in each of the six-hundred-odd American Legion posts in the state of California. That same month Hoover reported to the President that there were 17,000 FBI informants in 2,389 industrial plants throughout the country. (Kennett 65)

Not wanting to be left out, several state governments created State Guards (Georgia even had Guardettes) to guard against espionage since the National Guard units were being called up. The Guards initially guarded public buildings and bridges, but soon tired of the general lack of action and disbanded. Local police also routinely detained, harassed, and arrested oriental looking or foreign sounding American citizens (Kennett 66).

Peter Wright and John Armor in Manzanar (1988) describe the post-Pearl Harbor hysteria and the shameful 1942 Japanese-American relocation. Early in 1942 any legitimate concerns about Japanese-American espionage in Hawaii and on the West Coast soon became indistinguishable from overt racism and resentment over Japanese-American economic gains. Ironically, of the 158,000 Japanese-Americans living in

Hawaii, fewer than 2,000 were evacuated to the mainland camps, solely because of the beneficent efforts of the territorial governor General Emmons. In contrast, by November 1, 1942, 106,770 Japanese-Americans from California were "interned in six Western states and Arkansas" (Wright 9). Lieutenant General John DeWitt, commanding officer of the Fourth Army and Western Defense Command was the motivating force behind the "evacuation order" eventually signed by President Roosevelt (Wright 14).

General DeWitt's own peculiar brand of racism was made worse by the chaos of false reports of submarine attacks (mixed in with an occasional real Japanese foray). DeWitt's office also received uncounted reports of Japanese spies signalling submarines off the coast, though none were ever confirmed upon investigation. San Francisco even survived a false "air raid" on the night of December 8 after nervous naval radar operators thought they saw waves of Japanese bombers coming in from offshore. At least part of this fifth column panic surely germinated from the racist-inspired view that short orientals could never defeat tall Americans without help from spies and saboteurs (Wright 14).

Just after Pearl Harbor, California newspapers helped spread general fears by dutifully recycling false or exaggerated reports about the Japanese attack, printing such headlines as "Fifth Column Treachery Told," "Fifth Column Prepared Attack," and "Secretary of Navy [Frank Knox] Blames

5th Column for Attack" (Wright 20). Leaks from General DeWitt's headquarters spurred more wild headlines about Pearl Harbor: "Jap Boat Flashes Messages Ashore," "Map Reveals Jap Menace," and "Caps On Japanese Tomato Plants Point to Air Base" (Wright 20). Hollywood had also been doing its bit for some years to attune American audiences to spying and intrigue with prewar films like "Confessions of a Nazi Spy," "Lancer Spy," "Man at Large," "Above Suspicion," and "Man Hunt"--all about tracking down or eluding German spies in Europe and America (Thomas 52-127).

United States government propaganda efforts effectively mobilized Americans to suspect each other. Posters prominently displayed in the workplace often played on the theme of "loose lips sink ships." Some examples of these posters included one in which a drowning American sailor exclaims that "Someone Talked" while pointing at the viewer. Another poster offered an "Award For Careless Talk"--an Iron Cross--and yet another featured a golden retriever mourning the death of his master, a sailor as represented by a gold star pennant hanging over an empty blue jacket's uniform (Bowen 195-195). Factory workers complained about one poster in particular entitled, "He's Watching You," depicting a sinister-looking German soldier; they thought the figure was an American soldier who for some reason was watching American workers (Bowen 195).

Objectification of the enemy was a vital goal of official propaganda in order to help generate the prerequisite hatred to successfully prosecute the war. Paul Fussell, noted literary critic and combat infantry veteran, in his sobering study entitled Wartime: Understanding and Behavior in the Second World War examines the motivation of the combat soldier in depth. Fussell suggests that propaganda that demonized and dehumanized the enemy not only proved an effective motivator for soldiers and civilians to hate and want to kill the enemy, but filled in an ideological vacuum as well because the Allied soldiers knew so little about what they were fighting for, other than home and comrades.

Thus, the good people of McNeil, Arkansas by March of 1942 were hardly atypical of American citizens influenced by stories of treason and espionage and willing to believe the wildest rumors of enemy treachery. Fussell recalls one false rumor just after Pearl Harbor that described the Japanese on Oahu as having cut huge "arrows in fields to guide the Japanese planes towards their targets"; another story reported a dog that was "barking in morse code" on the beach in Oahu, "conveying treasonous messages to a Japanese submarine listening offshore" (40).

Some of the stories in March 1942, however, were undeniably true. Those were the stories illuminating the worst series of American military defeats in history. In

addition to losing most of the Pacific Fleet to the mud at Pearl Harbor, on March 11th General Douglas MacArthur left by motor torpedo boat on a 500-mile escape to Australia (Gilbert 307). By the next month, in April of 1942, 76,000 Filipino and American troops would surrender on Bataan, and in May 13,000 troops would surrender on Corregidor (Zich 100). American citizens had good reasons to be afraid and depressed (though a pacifist might point out that there was no good reason for American forces to be in the Philippines to begin with--or at Pearl Harbor for that matter).

"The Mob Scene at McNeil" suggests the prevailing popular approval of the War. Heart details the CO's dilemma of wanting to serve his country in some meaningful fashion while opposing a war effort which General Eisenhower likened to a "Great Crusade" against evil. How does one--how can one--morally oppose the struggle against such tyranny?

Just before the McNeil townspeople turn hostile on the CO's, the narrator is reading Walt Whitman, "'Come, I will make the continent indissoluble . . .'" (DIMH 15), the opening line of "For You O Democracy" from the "Calamus" section of Leaves of Grass (1881). Stafford's allusion to Whitman sharpens the general sense of irony regarding pacifists about to be lynched as spies. Whitman's theme in the Calamus section has to do with comradeship among the common working men of America. Whitman once described

"calamus" to an English editor as

. . . a common word here. It is the very large and aromatic grass, or rush, growing about water-ponds in the valleys. . . . The . . . ethereal sense of the term, as used in my book, arises probably from the actual Calamus presenting the biggest and hardest kind of spears of grass.

In his 1876 Preface to Leaves of Grass, Whitman describes the Calamus group of poems as presenting a kind of love (not homosexual he insists) that would serve as a corrective to a rough hewn, crude American democracy:

It is to the development, identification, and general prevalence of that fervid comradeship . . . that I look for the counterbalance and offset of our materialistic and vulgar American democracy, and for the spiritualization thereof.
(112N)

Whitman had hoped to be a poet of the people he wrote about, but few of the common working people ever read him (as we might observe from the O'Neil mob's unfamiliarity). Democracy has similarly failed to embrace Whitman's idealistic, pluralistic, and pacific views:

I will plant companionship thick as trees along the rivers of America, and along the shores of the great lakes, and all over the prairies,
I will make inseparable cities with their arms about each other's necks,

By the love of comrades,
By the manly love of comrades.

The second chapter of Heart, "A Story From the Social Antennae" is like a brief lull after the near "battle" of McNeil and probes the difficulty of "the manly love" of "comrades." The chapter is introduced by an untitled poem. In typical Stafford fashion (as demonstrated in his poetry),

the opening images reach back for connections to the previous writing:

Three sombre wheeling buzzards tantalize a vortex
invisble above a continent of pine
cliffs and brush canyons.
Casual denim-tiger, a man walks a far lane
toward casual supper.

Stafford's "continent of pine cliffs" recalls Whitman's "continent indissoluble" (DIMH 23) of the previous chapter. Whitman's continent, however, is political, democratic, human-centered. The very process of democracy from Whitman's perspective ought to weld comradeship among diverse peoples, fashioning a new American race: "I will make the most splendid race the sun ever shone upon . . ." (DIMH 117). Stafford's continent, by contrast, is not only a geographical land mass like North America, divided up politically and dominated by the United States, but also a continent in its rarer sense, meaning "a thing that holds or retains," a natural container. Stafford includes the full natural world in his definition, rather than dismissing it from consideration in human affairs. Conversely, human affairs are always dangerous to the natural container; even a pacifist walking to the messhall is dangerous in the natural world; he must be fed.

Stafford's introductory poem points out that "wheeling" nature also watches us, hungrily, and that all humans, like buzzards, are predators--even CO's can be viewed as

carnivores seeking a meal:

Hog liver? Squirrel? The body of a soft rabbit?
Far down in a gulf of thought spins Arkansas.
The sun goes down. The fur sound of winter
stifles the hurt mind. (DIMH 23)

The poem suggests that in order to understand a CO and pacifism, one must adopt a different viewpoint--a higher vantage point, but not necessarily a higher moral position. Pacifists walk the earth to dinner; they are not angels.

In "A Story From the Social Antennae," George, the narrator, and a few others are leaving Magnolia to be transferred to a camp in Santa Barbara, California. The narrator observes that George is depressed at having to leave:

Throughout his seven months in camp he had built up a world of his own--a home. He had become a leader in the group, and a devout follower of reconciliation in social relations. (DIMH 24)

"Reconciliation" is an important word to Stafford. The challenges of reconciliation, as George discovers, are formidable.

Although George is a leader and a committed activist, he is not a "hero" in the usual sense as Jeff Gundy rightly points out. Traditional American male heroes do not reconcile anything; they conquer or die in soldierly fashion. George, by contrast, is weaponless; he has only his own courage and patience to sustain him. Cut off from any kind of normal American life, his "family" has becomes the group of CO's around him.

E. E. Cummings describes a similar "family" of prisoners in his autobiographical The Enormous Room (1922). Cummings in 1917, a young man with pacifist sympathies (his father was a Unitarian minister), volunteered for ambulance duty with the French Army. For Cummings volunteering was a way to be a part of the Great War but remain a noncombatant. Cummings soon got arrested by the French authorities, however, because his close friend, another young American, had been reported for treasonous statements in his letters home about poor morale in the French Army--statements which happened to be true (x.). Cummings was guilty by association. Young and exuberant, Cummings and his friend Brown end up jailed for months in a French chapel-turned-prison. The young adventurers soon become part of a lively international group who create a temporary home and haven from the terrible fighting around them.

The Enormous Room is autobiography written, like Down in My Heart, with literary flair. And like Heart, it recreates a culture of individuals who emerge to Cummings as distinctly as do the features of the cavernous chapel in the dawn light of his first morning. This experience surely reinforced Cummings's later tenacious individualism in the face of regimentation and tradition.

While, like Cummings, George is very much an individual, the uncertainty of life in CPS, coupled with this loss of a caring group of friends, is overwhelming. On

his last night in camp, George prepares to make the lonely transition to a new camp where he will have to slowly build a new family for himself:

This time he sat down for some music on his last night in camp. Tomorrow he was going far away, leaving his friends so precariously found in a world otherwise alien. He was going on what he considered a mission, a sacrifice necessary under his creed. And he was interested in quiet and soft music. (DIMH 25)

A private man who has decided to live out his convictions, George, unfortunately, has no privacy himself in the barracks' common room. "Doc, our loudest editor," not understanding George's need for quiet, loudly engages George in conversation. The oblivious Doc "kept on mutilating the last evening," not understanding that George was leaving "his closest approximation to home." Frustrated, George lashes out: "'Go away! . . . 'Go away and be still.' He motioned brusquely, palm out" (DIMH 26).

Like a soldier on the night before a dangerous mission, George has withdrawn into himself for strength, pushing away present annoyances. The narrator observes, however, that as soon as George angrily reacts, he fails in the very peace mission for which he has been preparing: "George . . . lived for a life of reconciliation, of kindness, of governing the mind and its retributive feelings" (26). Above all else, the pacifist must learn to deal with the ambiguous human present and not the future hypothetical. The pacifist must be vigilantly alert to nuances, or misunderstandings--even

between the similarly committed--those missteps that can instantly overwhelm the fragile etiquette of connections:

And then he sat there in the wreck of his attempts on his last night in the Magnolia, Arkansas peace camp, with his favorite record music in his hands; and he sat there looking at the record and didn't look up. . . . (DIMH 26)

The narrator, though facing essentially the same loss of home himself, is surprisingly detached here from George's emotional turmoil. The narrator hovers over the drama, describing George whose fragile world depends upon others and yet conspires to make him react, to "lash out." The ethics of living in peace with others is unrelentingly hard.

The third chapter, "The Battle of Anapumu Creek," continues Heart's counter-war novel. An introductory, unnamed poem gives us the rough, nonhuman "texture" of life in the chaparral country surrounding the Santa Barbara CPS camp:

We called it the chaparral,
folded, easily draped and softly a comfort
over that land egg-beatered out of rock.

Low thickets and small trees, covering mountainous terrain, the chaparral somehow softens the harsh land. Here, and in much of Stafford's poetry, nature becomes more than simply a landscape for art, more than glib personification or mood-setting device. Stafford's world, even in this exiled setting, is a mysterious, interconnected whole. Stafford's cosmos is complete and transcendentally meaningful. In his conception, human disorder--war, conflict, personal

violence--is not a natural state. Other choices are available. For Stafford, listening to the world of God's creation is like listening to God. The chaparral covers the land in absolution:

It lapped over our cliff
and rested like an evening of shade above
the breaks of the river;
a soft statement of greenness, down all
the hills,
in wide forgiveness, a layer of dew and night
that never moves on:
the dimension of life on that land. (DIMH 27)

In this harsh place, humans do not dominate the earth: they pass through. Human history and human activities in such a wild place get scaled down when compared with the geological history of the mountains and the timeless life of the chaparral:

The shaggy old pelt of our land
worried by rain and by sun,
a shawl over Little Pine Mountain,
a pelt over Cachume Ridge,
a help and a quietness as high as our heads
as we walked with pilgrim souls
toward the rocky hills,
those permanent gestures,
inland or toward the sea. (DIMH 28)

The CO's, literally cut off from American culture and history, take comfort wherever they find it, and the "permanent gestures" of the hills remind the speaker of the ephemeral nature of human gestures, particularly violent ones.

Likewise, in Stafford's poetry, the profound natural silence of the "continent" contrasts with cacophonous human activity. Stafford does not so much reject humanity, as

being myopic and self-important, as he places it as only one among many primary powers. Stafford is aware that other histories--European, Native American, geological, spiritual--predate the vaunted oldest democracy in the world.

The chapter proper of "The Battle of Anapuma Creek" concerns an episode of confrontation, a "battle" between a Forest Service foreman, one Eric Kloppenburg, and a small group of CO's sent under him to set up a "spike camp" in the chaparral back country. Kloppenburg is described as "a big, rough, tough hater of Germans [despite, or perhaps because of, his own ancestry], Japanese, and CO's" (DIMH 28). The spike camp's function is to fight fires in the back country, to "spike" them, in effect, before they get out of control. The CO's in the West often fought forest fires or performed other forestry labor directly under Forest Service supervision. Early in the CPS program, the government men who directed the CO's were confused as to whether to treat the men like draftees, civilian laborers, or prisoners.

In the new camp at Santa Barbara thousands of miles from any battlefield, the CO's overhear the Forest Service men talk about the CO's in unguarded warlike terms:

I, myself [the narrator] had heard one man, later our friend, say in the ranger station, "I wish I was superintendent of that camp; I'd line 'em up and uh-uh-uh-uh" --he made the sound of a machine gun. (DIMH 28)

Another superintendent, the narrator tells us, "had patrolled the camp after dark with a shotgun; one had reached for his pistol and shouted, during those first days at the camp at a lagging CO, 'Don't run, or I'll shoot!'" (DIMH 29).

The great challenge confronting the CO's, thus, was to reconcile their own beliefs with such militancy. If the "Mob Scene at McNeil" was a battle "lost" because the principles of Gandhian active nonviolent resistance could not be carefully practiced (a surprise attack by the mob precluded such deliberation), "The Battle of Anapuma Creek" symbolizes pacifists actively doing "battle" with the forces of hatred, violence, and bigotry. In the main camp, the narrator remembers another revealing conversation:

One Forest Service man had told me with the greatest seriousness that he had gone out with a gang and killed a "German" within twenty miles of our camp one night just after the beginning of the war.

"But," I protested, "that's unconstitutional; the man was living here; that's downright fascistic."

"Son," he said, impressively lowering his voice, "when it's a matter of defending my country I'll do anything--law or not." (DIMH 29)

While this particular episode of vigilantism may or may not have actually happened, such incidents were documented and often tolerated officially. Soon after Pearl Harbor, for example, the Tennessee Department of Conservation asked, facetiously, for six million "licenses" to hunt invading Japanese at a fee of two dollars each. The purchasing

department declared that licenses would not be required as it was "open season on Japs" (Bailey 26). Such anecdotes, slogans, and rumors--both true and fabricated--represent the bellicose fabric of the 1940s American war culture.

The men in the Santa Barbara CPS camp decide to send their "champion pacifists, in an attempt to win, nonviolently of course, against the antagonism of Eric" the Forest Service foreman (DIMH 29). Lennie, one of the men chosen, when asked by a ranger why he would not be a soldier replies, "'Do you have two hours to give to that question? Well, then, forget it--I'm tired of trying to set right in two minutes what the radio and the papers and movies have been setting wrong for years'" (DIMH 30). Indicative of Lennie's point about American culture is the Hollywood military propaganda disseminated in films like Sergeant York, the hit movie of 1942, starring Gary Cooper as the gentle Quaker pacifist who turns into a World War I soldier hero (Griffith 371). In the film, York wrestles with serving in the Army but eventually gives in (or gives up--surrendering his values) and decides to fight. To the delight of film audiences across America, he ignores his lifelong religious convictions and proceeds to pick off haplessly stupid German soldiers like so many wild turkeys.

Like soldiers themselves patrolling enemy territory, the CO's march off to spike fires in the chaparral. Ken, the acting cook, and Eric soon face off over Eric's

demeaning treatment which includes cursing at Ken and the others, beating on a plate with a spoon, and calling Ken a "Chink" (DIMH 31). Ken refuses to cook unless Eric's behavior changes, and, subsequently, George also refuses the job: "Eric threatened [George] with dismissal and return to main camp with charges of insubordination" (DIMH 32). Analogous to disobeying a military order, George's refusal risks prosecution and federal prison.

The entire CO group also refuses to cook and draws Eric instead into a circle of negotiation. Point by point the CO's convince the initially hostile Eric that compromise is possible. Group consensus, not a simple majority, arrived at through careful, respectful argument and thoughtful silence is a typical pacifist process--and also typical of peace churches, especially the Church of the Brethren and the Society of Friends (Stafford's camps were all Brethren-administered).

Although Eric has the power to give orders and even to "order the camp struck" (DIMH 33), he soon realizes that the only way the camp will succeed is through cooperation. Neither side can "win" the battle, so both sides must give up something from their position. In an actual military conflict, of course, dehumanizing one's enemies into groups of stereotypical "Japs," "Chinks," or "Krauts" is useful in order to hate them efficiently; many CO's were similarly derided as "Conchies." The opposite occurs in the

pacifists' battle, however, when Eric stops hating CO's as a group and begins to relate to them as individuals in community. In another strange parallel to war movies, the foreman and the CO's here form a bond much like the familiar gruff sergeant and his men in innumerable war films. But instead of the John Wayne type sergeant whipping his recruits into killing shape as in the "The Sands of Iwo Jima," the CO's instruct their foreman in the virtues of cooperation, respect and patience.

"We Built a Bridge" describes a visit by some CO's to Gerald Heard's Trabuco College during the summer of 1942.⁶ Heard was a Christian mystic and pacifist whose most famous adherent was Aldous Huxley. Ken, a CO in the Santa Barbara camp, and committed to meditation and nonviolence, has kept up a continuous correspondence with other mystics and "Japanese Americans in their concentration camps" (DIMH 37). Ken arranges for several CO's to visit the new Trabuco College in Southern California. At Trabuco the narrator is introduced to Eastern spirituality. Developing their spiritual life was compelling to men who were so at odds with the militant culture around them:

Our thoughts in those wartimes were peculiarly susceptible to Ken's kind of philosophy, for we met continual frustration; and every magazine,

⁶In a letter to this author dated August 25, 1990, Stafford explains that he visited Trabuco (near Santa Ana in California) in 1942.

newspaper, movie, or stranger was a challenge to convictions that were our personal, inner creations. (DIMH 37)

While the narrator willingly experiments in meditation and other mental activities at Trabuco College, he remains largely unmoved by Heard's methods, probably because Stafford's narrator (like Stafford himself) had already embraced his own kind of mysticism, finding gifts of beauty everywhere in the wholeness of nature:

Even today I cannot divide the effects of that visit, with its opening perspectives, from life experiences that would have existed even without the week of education at Trabuco. As a matter of fact, the experience began even before we left camp. . . . We worked in snow that day. First the far peaks grew vague; then the intervening sweep of space received a tremendous gentleness--spaced, slow flakes, thicker and thicker. We saw the evergreens whiten gradually, aloof in the lazy fall; and when we looked straight up, the flakes were falling dark from nowhere, down, down into our eyes. . . . It was as if something were trying to make up to the world for a great loss, and to put it to sleep (DIMH 38).

This passage demonstrates the narrator's movement away from humanity's pettiness and violence towards the cold grandeur of nature. Stafford's later poetry likewise moves on a physical elemental plane, seeking humanity's place, expecting connections--not alienation--and finding them everywhere.

Heard presents a week-long menu of Taoism and St. Augustine to the visitors; but even more than Heard's message, the narrator recalls his dramatic style by firelight:

The night sessions were particularly impressive, with the fire crackling, sending out beams to the rapt, swarthy faces; to the dark books on the wall shelves; to the tall windows looking out on the vast wild slopes; and to the lean, sparkling man with the quick head and the decisive goatee. (DIMH 42)

Such a setting contains everything that we might connect with Stafford: light and darkness, intense talk, books, nature at its wildest. Heard offers the visiting CO's some useful spiritual phrases including "illumined spirit," 'inwardly profitable,' 'the way of wonder,' 'alert passivity,' 'anonymous memories,' 'the love offensive,' and 'divine incarnation'--phrases that often present a blend of the spiritual and the concrete (DIMH 45).

Heard also contributes to a pacifist historical attitude in his concept of "the specious present" which he defines as

an interval during which nothing effective can be done to interrupt a series of events that has passed a certain critical point. [Heard's] illustrative comparison was that asking a pacifist what he would have done if he had been in command on Pearl Harbor day is comparable to running the Normandie at full speed till it reaches only fifty feet from the dock and then turning to a passenger and saying, "All right, you stop her." (DIMH 45)

This view of history coincides with the well-known pacifist notion that wars come in incremental fashion from a long way off and then gather a fatal, unstoppable momentum.

Heard's most important contribution to Stafford, however, may have been his emphasis on the devotional life. Franklin Zahn, a Christian Scientist and former CO, in his

Deserter From Violence: Experiments With Gandhi's Truth

describes his own Trabuco experience with Heard in terms of learning how to pray rather than to meditate:

Gerald's talks were mainly on the various levels of prayer practiced by mystics--mostly Catholic saints. In the beginner's purgative of devotional life the most elementary level was that of vocal prayer. Next came discursive silent prayer in which the mind considers the Divine. . . .
(DIMH 74)

Zahn explained that Heard placed a low value on "petitionary prayer," offering rather that prayer does not so much "bring good things to people but rather brings people to where good things are" (76). In Stafford's poetry, this place where good things are is often in the present tense imaginative contemplation of the natural world. Zahn quotes an Archbishop Temple as saying that "right relation between prayer and conduct is not that conduct is supremely important and that prayer may help it, but that prayer is supremely important and that conduct tests it" (76). While Stafford's narrator describes Trabuco in terms of meditation, Zahn understood the college as Heard's "center for the study and practice of prayer" (66). Another important aspect of Stafford's later poetry emphasized in Trabuco's regimen is the discipline of silence. Near total silence through the daylight hours was routinely observed except for Heard's talks at mealtimes.

Ultimately, the narrator seems both instructed and bemused by Heard's rejection of the material world and his

embrace of a world of meditation and heightened mental experiences. The narrator's attitude lies somewhere between the extremes of Heard's ascetic, prayerful isolation from the world and George's passionate social activism (George is noticeably absent from the Trabuco visit). Upon leaving Trabuco, the narrator immediately feels not only the lingering glow of Trabuco's inward journey, but its unearthliness as well. The men walk down the road that they had helped repair and cross the small bridge they had built together:

We started the material motors, turned out of the material gate onto the material paved road, and raised our material arms in farewell to our hosts, who stood waving from the edge of the ranch of mysticism--a place of old coats, tennis shoes, and general casualness a place where Gerald Heard talked to us around the fireplace, saying, "Why . . . why?" talking the power of accepting within ourselves a responsibility for what goes on between ourselves and others. (DIMH 46)

The difficulties of family life under CPS are exemplified in "A CO Wedding." The chapter parallels and gently parodies a "normal" wartime romance and wedding. Since CO's were not being paid for their service by the government and only received \$2.50 a month spending money from their church sponsors (DIMH 10), many CPS men were practically penniless. "A CO Wedding" begins with a vignette displaying George's pacifist commitment and resulting alienation from his natural family: "George used to sit down in the library every night, at first writing letters home; but later he had no one there to write

to" (47).⁷ George's bitterness about being rejected by his family is evident:

When I told [George] about Larry's honeymoon trip, he didn't think it was funny.

"No girl should marry into this kind of life," he said; "it may sound like an adventure till you live it." (DIMH 47)

Like many more typical wartime weddings, Larry and Barbara's is the product of little money and last minute plans. The narrator notes with amusement that the camp's project superintendent upon hearing about the upcoming wedding "went into action--verbal action" grandly proposing "parades of denimed CO's and archways of brush hooks" (DIMH 47). The brush hooks, of course, are analogous to the military custom of forming an arch of dress swords for the officer groom and his bride to pass under. The wedding day, unfortunately, arrives in "driving rain" and the honeymoon car breaks down. After the ceremony and "banquet" in the dining hall, the two honeymooners, the narrator, Larry's friend Jake, and two others needing a lift into Los Angeles drive off in pouring rain in the barely repaired car (DIMH 49).

Later, the narrator hears that the weekend desert honeymoon had been washed out by the constant rain and that the destination had proven to be abandoned, uninhabitable

⁷Many religious CO's were ostracized not only by their family but even by their churches. Catholic CO's in Camp Simon, Michigan, for example, were rebuffed by the local church and felt little support from other Catholics, probably because the American Catholic Church had come out so strongly in support of the war.

shacks previously owned by a friend who had been drafted the year before. Larry's friend Jake sums up the experience with the observation, made three times, "'What's happened to us shouldn't happen to a dog'" (DIMH 49-50). Jake also quotes Thomas Paine's famous rallying cry, "These are the times that try men's souls." Paine's sentiment, in ironic comparison to the plight of rain-soaked CO's, was written in 1776 at a time when Washington was watching his army dissolve due to brief enlistments, discouragement, and winter. Paine argues in his pamphlet Common Sense that

The summer soldier and the sunshine patriot will, in this crisis, shrink from the service of their country; but he that stands it now, deserves the love and thanks of man and woman. Tyranny like hell, is not easily conquered; yet we have this consolation with us that the harder the conflict, the more glorious the triumph. What we obtain too cheap, we esteem too lightly; 'tis dearness only that gives everything its value. Heaven knows how to put a proper price upon its goods; and it would be strange indeed, if so celestial an article as Freedom should not be highly rated. (Bartlett 384)

The struggle against war produces strange patriots. The pacifist also "fights" for freedom like the soldier-patriot. Both are tested most severely when the issue is at doubt. As George points out in Heart, the new pacifist couple will suffer and struggle as well in this conflict (DIMH 47).

If "The Mob Scene at McNeil" is the pacifist equivalent to soldiers preparing for battle, "The Embers of a Fire" evokes the battle itself. The historical time of this episode is initially unclear, probably sometime in late 1943. While the CO's originally "enlisted" for a one-year

term (that is, those entering CPS in 1940), after Pearl Harbor CPS enlistment, like all military service, was extended for the duration. The CO's, thus, like servicemen, could only wait for the larger historical forces to play themselves out; except, unlike the servicemen, the CO's could do nothing materially to shorten the war.

"The Embers of a Fire" begins with another anecdote which may or may not have involved Stafford directly--assuming, of course, that it happened at all. In the Acknowledgements to Heart, Stafford apparently credits one Henry A. Faulconer "for the incident introducing the chapter . . . (DIMH 96).⁸ The sketch has a familiar, possibly mythic ring to it and seems like a good example of a fictional anecdote/joke with interchangeable parts which should have happened even if it never did.

Stafford's corporate first-person narrator is sitting at a camp fire on a cold night in California "on a ridge above the fire line," having "fought" a forest fire--the martial imagery is clear. He is joined by two fellow firefighters, a "state prisoner" and a "serviceman" waiting to be discharged. Our curious narrator asks how the serviceman received his purple heart: "he said it was for the wounds he received while accounting for the lives of

⁸It is unclear from this attribution whether Stafford himself witnessed the event described and needed help recalling it (and why would he since it had happened only five years earlier and was clearly memorable?) or whether Stafford simply was not present. The latter seems more plausible.

some vast number of Japanese--fifty-three, I think" (DIMH 53). The Filipino state prisoner who is doing the "fifteenth year of a life term" replies glumly:

"I killed a Jap too, but I guess it was out of season."

The decorated one looked at him with a sad expression and said, "No fooling, is that what you're up for?"

"That's what I'm up for," said the little fellow. "But if you think that's funny--here's a guy," and he indicated me, "who's up because he refused to kill Japs." (DIMH 53)

The sketch is humorous; it reads like a kind of a formula joke into which one could plug in different types. It is also suspiciously similar to the famous Robert Lowell-Czar Lepke story that comes from Lowell's federal imprisonment as a CO; Lowell had protested the Allied bombing of German civilians and refused induction (Hamilton 91). The Lowell story is a favorite among pacifists. Lowell, following his trial, was placed in a holding cell in New York City's West Street Jail next to mafioso Czar Lepke of "Murder Incorporated" fame who reportedly said to Lowell, "'I'm in for killing. What are you in for?' 'Oh, I'm in for refusing to kill.' And Lepke burst out laughing" (Hamilton 91).

Interestingly, John Peck, a prominent pacifist and political activist, reports essentially the same story in an autobiographical account except that Lowell Naeve, rather than Robert Lowell, had the exchange with Lepke in Danbury

Federal Prison. Lepke, according to Peck's story, could not quite grasp what being a CO was about. As Peck reports:

The irony of prison "rehabilitation" for pacifists is illustrated by an encounter in jail between Louis Lepke, the boss of "Murder, Inc." and Lowell Naeve. Naeve tried to explain his crime, but Lepke failed to comprehend exactly what a C.O. was. Then, suddenly, the convicted murderer understood. "You mean they put you in here for not killing?" he asked incredulously, and laughed with gusto. Neither Lepke nor Naeve was "rehabilitated"; however, the former was electrocuted, while the latter received another prison term--one because he killed and the other because he did not. (Naeve 29)

Either Lepke liked to set this joke up repeatedly--about pacifists getting jailed for not killing--or it was simply too good a story not to incorporate in several "factual" accounts.

In any case, Stafford's own anecdote (or his friend Henry Faulconer's, or Lowell's, or Naeve's . . .) proceeds logically to its ironic punch line and is believable, perhaps, because of certain "factual" touches and the dramatic after-the-battle-like setting. Some of the specifics, though, seem either odd in the telling or fabricated. The "serviceman," for example, would be more properly and easily described as a G.I. or a Marine. Also, the man's "purple heart" logically would not have been the actual medal but the ribbon representing the medal (one might wonder whether a soldier assigned to fight a forest fire would be wearing either medals or ribbons on work fatigues).

Certainly, the basic ironic story of pacifists being imprisoned for refusing to kill in the midst of so much indiscriminate slaughter is now firmly a part of the American pacifist culture. Stafford's own version, however, has a soldier's toughness to it because of the dangerous setting. The factual validity of Stafford's story is, from the pacifist perspective, probably immaterial to the ultimate truth of the irony and the clear point that no individual who chooses to kill is absolved of that personal responsibility, a pacifist tenet set in stone.

"The Embers of the Fire" narrative proper parallels a "manly" combat experience. The narrator, George, and other veterans of CPS get picked up by a Forest Service truck and driven to "a fire seventy miles away, at the foot of Glacier Mountain, in lava country" (DIMH 54). A "new draftee" Roland volunteers to go along. The men, like grizzled war veterans, prepare the young Roland for possible battle-like scenes:

. . . we told him of the rigors of fire-fighting, the times we had seen men faint from exhaustion and be carried away on horseback like sacks of meal; United States soldiers we had seen on sit-down strike when the pack train with water failed to arrive; men wall-eyed and trembling, shaken by an hour-long flight in terror before a runaway forest fire; Italian prisoners--homeless, weary, forsaken--struggling in a long line down a mountainside, singing, in the evening
(DIMH 55)

Even here, thousands of miles from any front, the war is inescapable; it is the inevitable framework of even a

pacifist's experience. The narrator describes "a devastated, lumbered-off area that looked like the pictures of Tarawa . . ." (DIMH 60). The Tarawa reference provides a benchmark date here of 1943 and hints at a comparison, perhaps, between the human mismanagement of the bloody Marine landings on Tarawa and the wasteful mismanagement of a logging operation. In each case, nature--including human nature--has been deliberately and violently ruined.

Arriving at the scene of the fire, the CO's and the Forest Service personnel establish a "fire line" or cleared space, downhill, about fifty feet from the fire . . ." (DIMH 60). The narrator presents the ensuing action in distinctly military terms: "Our line held. By noon we were patrolling; now and then attacking spot fires that sprang up from sparks alighting beyond the lines . . ." (DIMH 61).⁹ Parallelling the use of flamethrower packs on Tarawa to burn out the Japanese soldiers in caves and underground, the firefighters wear "backpack pumps" of water to soak the hot spots in the underbrush (DIMH 61). Adding to the danger, lava rock cuts the men's boots while blackened tree branches scratch their faces. During a rest break, the narrator, George, and Roland observe "a porcupine, its quills singed off, its eyes blinded . . . butting its way through the charred

⁹In another eerie parallel to the war, a small group of highly trained CO's served in an elite "smoke jumper" unit, parachuting into fire areas--extremely hazardous work.

undergrowth," moving "unswerving" toward them (DIMH 62). Roland, of the romantic knightly name, realizes, like a young soldier after his first battle, that the reality of the adventure is profoundly anti-romantic and ground-level cruel:

. . . I glanced at Roland with his reddened eyes, weary mouth, and blackened cheek--the thing that had once been an animal put one foot before the other, its feet pigeon-toed, its weariness so great that often a hind foot would push back and then drag. . . . George jumped forward with a stick and put it out of its hot, black stifling world (DIMH 62).

By this point, three years into the CPS program, many of its veterans were becoming depressed at the financial hardships, family problems, and unsatisfactory witness for peace that such service entailed. In camps across the country, CPS men began to rebel against the menial work and the quasi-military regimen. These rebellions took the form of work strikes and slowdowns, phony sick calls, petitions, cafeteria sit-ins and, ultimately, going "AWOL" to invoke federal imprisonment. Some, sick of what they perceived to be an ineffectual witness, even enlisted in the armed services (Eller 77-84).

In "The Embers of A Fire," the fire of idealism has literally burned out in many of the men, just as it might die out in veteran soldiers. Some of the CPS men demonstrate this flickering of ideals by describing how after they broke their fire camp, they casually destroyed equipment and stole camp supplies:

Roland, silent, sat taking it all in, with that wide-eyed eagerness we had all shown when we first came to camp; but he was coming into a group that had grown different from what it was in those early days--more cynical. (DIMH 66)

The new CPS men from Solona Flats are termed "ridiculous" by the veterans for wanting to construct an important "witness" (DIMH 66).

Speaking quietly to Roland on the ride back to camp, the increasingly radical George voices his frustrations with the dilemma of "taking sides in everything"; he believes in the interconnectedness of all life and the earth. Stafford the poet shares George's spiritual attitude which refuses to enter into the kind of chauvinistic competition that creates conflict, violence, and war. Back in camp, the weary firefighters discover a CO on his bed reading Lloyd Douglas's The Robe.

The Robe (1942) was published in a pocket edition for servicemen as were many other popular and classical works. One of the best selling books in publishing history, The Robe, a story of early Christian faith and endurance, sold 450,000 copies in two years (Fussell 236). The novel is based on the legend of the robe of Jesus, a figure of both mythical and historical dimensions. Christ's robe, worn at his crucifixion, is an appropriate pacifist symbol of the power of sacrifice, of submitting humbly to martial violence as a means of actively overcoming its earthly power. This garment was supposedly gambled away at Calvary by Roman

soldiers, much as people, particularly soldiers in war, have always gambled on their faith. The Robe offers an alternative history to the military chronicles of triumph and defeat: the story of the crucifixion and the miracle of the resurrection encompass both.

In "Mountain Conscription," set in the new Fredonyer Pass spike camp in California, the narrator's "outfit" has dwindled to three from the original Magnolia, Arkansas camp. Unlike a veteran military unit, of course, no one has died, but there has been a certain attrition of the spirit. As the war drags on and new camps are formed, increasingly, the CPS men become aware of the potential for disaster:

Deliberately the men went into this new community . . . knowing . . . that catastrophe could ensue if human relations were bad, that under conscription even the most careful might begin that course that leads to the black list, the government camp, and possibly to prison and lifelong rebellion. . . . (DIMH 71)

George's chapter-ending soliloquy summarizes the CPS men's gathering frustration with their pacifist statement and the so-called "work of national importance" as given them:

"It's as if war is a game," George said. "People retain the same qualities throughout big historical changes; a fad comes along, something like peewee golf, but with a slightly murderous effect, and people go along--with their same friendly feelings--murdering each other. . . . the war goes on and we are stuck up here in the mountains to pile brush in the back country." (DIMH 72)

A recurrent force in "Mountain Conscription," and a central Stafford image in his poetry, is the wind, which

represents both a physical and a spiritual process and influence. The wind is the freeing hand of nature: below Fredonyer Pass in the rolling "open country," "the grass galloped in the wind all day long, like an endless flock on the move" (DIMH 69). Stafford's wind is the great natural connector flowing between all things animate and inanimate, a sacred motion connecting all people no matter how different or estranged.

"A young Mormon in a flier's uniform" seeking to convert the CPS men to his brand of Christianity quotes the Bible, "'Many have the spirit of Godliness in their hearts but deny the power thereof . . . '" (DIMH 70). The narrator wearily adds, "What spirit had we by now in our hearts? And what was the power thereof?" As if in sympathetic reply to these questions, he hears "the wind whimpering through the broken windowpanes" of their new-but-old barracks and later "rubbing along the eaves" (DIMH 72). The men in the new camp are not just "starting a home"; by this time they are "carrying a home" with them (DIMH 70}, and the narrator's home has become not a region of the country, but a wider and deeper dimension.

"Duet for Cello and Flute" takes place at the end of the war in early August 1945. The chapter is introduced by a poetic fragment that illustrates Stafford's intimacy with this his natural home and demonstrates his love for river,

wind, and earth:

Along my river frogs like thought
plop into depths before my foot.

Lift of the wind will drop a crumb--
a fragment of my gleaming home.

Put on like shoes, my face will have
delight for each day's epitaph.

And I will raise my head and care:
Oh, orphan world, I love you dear. (DIMH 72)

Stafford the poet moves in a natural process along his river--both his life's water course and Nature's--and through his poetry inscribes and celebrates "each day's epitaph," claims and parents an "orphan world."

"Duet" sketches a visit by the narrator, the camp director, and George to Rich Bar, formerly a California mining town and now a ghost town temporarily inhabited by the wives and children of two CO's, Abraham Thorman and Dan James. Thorman and James had served in CPS nearly four years at this point. Families of CO's often suffered greatly from poverty since the men served without pay and received no hospitalization benefits or workers' compensation. The Thomases and the Jameses represent a counter-culture to the mainstream: Abe Thorman had taught in a progressive high school in New York, and he and his wife Jesse had worked with migrants in California. Dan and Mary James were interested in world government. The families wanted to continue Rich Bar after the war as a craft colony, "Abe would continue with his writing--stories for children,

stories that humanized cooperatives, migrants and foreigners" (DIMH 76). Stories would have to serve the social causes where journalists had failed and historians would not go.

Mined out materially, Rich Bar can offer only spiritual and artistic possibilities. This isolated Eden has become a pacifist garden, though rugged, hard, and imperfect--deer eat the crops. The offspring being raised there will go forth with a practical and not a naive idealism. The narrator notes that the children find a snake and because they have been properly taught about snakes--about serpents in the garden--"they carefully identified it as harmless and then proceeded unperturbed" (DIMH 76). The day ends with an impromptu family concert of cello, flute, and singing.

The music, and art, and promise of Rich Bar, however, much like the life of the CPS families, remain hidden and isolated from mainstream American culture:

From the highway you couldn't see the real part of Rich Bar. Travelers couldn't see the homes where the Jameses and the Thormans lived; and of course, the noise of the trains and river would cut off the evening sound of the cello and the flute. (DIMH 77)

Walking along the river back near the CPS camp that same night, the narrator is reminded of another river in his hometown where a "wanderer molded in the big sandbar of the Arkansas River a sand statue of Christ on the cross" (DIMH 78). This allusion suggests the idea of Christ's pacifist sacrifice and gift to the world. The stranger's sand

sculpture, unlike the usual towering church symbol, is (appropriately for Stafford) at ground level. It is a "big statue" but "lying on the sand" so that the people can walk around it in awe and talk quietly about it. This is Stafford's Christ--mysterious, yet of the earth and the water, a part of life's river, apt to appear anywhere.

Returning to camp that night, the men hear on the radio that the United States "had dropped a new kind of deadly bomb on a city of Japanese people" (DIMH 78). Nothing could better illustrate the gulf between the pacifist culture and the American war culture. The newly born Edenic community molded out of a ghost town in the desert contrasts the human-made desert of Hiroshima and its newly made ghosts.

"The End of the War" continues this cultural contrast. It is a bookend chapter to "The Mob Scene at McNeil," and like "McNeil," encapsulates pacifist ambivalence and alienation in a popular war. "The End of the War" is introduced with a cryptic, dramatic poem:

All violent like the knife that drove.
the pity-begging life out through the eyes,
and wilted the choked voice in little cries
that bubbled and blinked out along the floor.
(DIMH 79)

The second stanza seems to equate "rivers" with individual lives or even, perhaps, with the lives of whole peoples evaporated by the war:

All hungry like the outlaw stare that tore
the North and reeled the rivers in along the spool
that never would unwind them any more
to wander cool

but stretched them taut to all that's far away.

All lost by dusty roads, all fled with love,
all hid along with play:
all hurt by what we lost who conquered in the war-
so violent, so lost, so far away. (79)

For the pacifist, war is loss, no matter who wins.

The narrator, George, and Del are visiting a nearby small town on August 9, 1945 when suddenly the news spreads that Japan has surrendered. Everyone has been waiting for the news, and the town erupts in car honking, tickertape, and general celebration. The CO's, however, "from exile" feel isolated and depressed. The narrator asks, "Why don't we feel like doing something? . . . Aren't we glad the shooting's over?" Del replies that "Yes, of course; we're glad . . . Everyone can get back home" (80). George's response to the narrator and Del previews his increasingly radical stance:

"But how long will it be before the soldiers still alive can come back? . . . Before there's no more fighting anywhere, no more intimidation of people in their homes by strange uncomprehending men in foreign uniforms with foreign speech and foreign money? . . . No more forcing of unwilling boys far from home to remain in their barracks among the glares of the citizens, to defend institutions they hate against the people they love, to stand guard over men who are where they belong, doing the jobs they need to do, trying to build a way of life for themselves?" . . . How can we join in the celebration of the atom bomb?" (DIMH 81).

George is like a grizzled war veteran returned from the front, feeling isolated from and incredulous at the prevailing civilian culture.

George emerges here for the narrator as a radical alternative. In the midst of the wild celebration of peace, the CO's draw apart from the crowds to watch. As pacifists they are not only marginalized by the revelers, but ignored. Far from being any threat to national security--as they were perceived to be in the McNeil of 1942--the CO's and their peace witness have become invisible. The CO's have arrived at the last chapter of this particular American romantic war novel realizing that it reads "happily ever after" for everyone else but them.

George observes that when a war ends, the pacifist's work begins:

"Look at them . . . The war goes on every day. They fight it when the shooting begins, but we've got to fight it when the good can be done. During a war is a time of rest for a pacifist; the war itself is an incident, a lost battle in itself; it is just a part of those cheatings, bluffings, maneuverings, which we have got to stay out of all the time. We've got to stay out to be consistent--no nationally advertised brands for us--of toothpaste, or soap, or salvation." (DIMH 81-82)

George despairs that most Americans need a war to motivate them to sacrifice:

"Any one of those sounding a horn now could go and sacrifice his life tomorrow for some good cause--not a cause assigned to him, but one he chooses. Do you think he'll do it? No, he'll wait till it comes to shooting again. . . ." (DIMH 82)

To the narrator, George has become more "alien" than he was when surrounded by the mob at McNeil. Through George's eyes, the narrator sees "a set of citizens, not independent,

not thinking" (DIMH 82). The happy crowd at one point begins singing "the sentimentally nostalgic songs of World War I, like Till We Meet Again, Tipperary, or A Long Long Trail. . . . in pretty good harmony" (DIMH 83). Unable to celebrate the war or its end, to enter into such harmony, the men stand "as aliens among celebrators" (DIMH 84). George, thinking about the recruiting poster slogan--"What did you do in the war, Daddy"--asks his fellow CPS men, "'Daddy, what did you do to win the peace?'" (DIMH 84). For George, the answer is, so far not much, and he knows that a stronger witness is required.

Of the many choices, the many river paths that Stafford took in his life, George's path to radical protest and imprisonment is an important one. Even though Stafford ultimately refused this extreme, he honors it in George. In Heart's last chapter, "To Meet a Friend," George has finally gone AWOL and is out on bail awaiting trial. Before he leaves camp, George types a letter to the Attorney General listing his reasons for leaving CPS: "a precedent for slave labor, not a place for constructive service in crucial times, a dictatorial program administered, in spite of the wording of the law, by military men" (DIMH 89).

Meeting George at the Paseo in Los Angeles, the narrator realizes that his own life is also close to the legal edge:

I remember exactly how it was that day, talking to my friend, out on bail and due to go to prison in

a week. When you are a CO and near the prison stage yourself, you notice certain things." (DIMH 86)

Even in the local library (a recurring favorite Stafford space in his life and poetry) there is no respite from cultural alienation:

No one is watching you. . . . People who wave are waving at another person, someone behind you. On the street no one calls your name; but in spite of not talking to anyone you are learning everyone's language--more than ever before. You are going to a big school, with halls that go everywhere. It costs everything you have to attend it. (DIMH 87)

George recounts his arrest in Amarillo after going AWOL. The police put him in a holding cell, he explains, and announced to the other prisoners: "Here's a dirty yellow bastard who wouldn't fight for his country. Anyone who wants to bust him--go ahead" (DIMH 88). Fortunately, the prisoners there were madder at the police than at George.

George, at peace since his decision, begins to argue with the narrator about staying in CPS:

"How can you stay up there in camp doing Forest Service work when there are people starving abroad, and children in the cities all around here falling into delinquency? Why do you consent to waste your time up there?" (DIMH 89)

The narrator answers that he does not "consent" but can do no good in prison. Stafford's own life philosophy comes through clearly in the narrator's next remark: "I don't believe that I can take a stand and do something without regard to the effects of my actions on others; I want to change others, not alienate them" (DIMH 90).

Later, the narrator gets letters from George from a high security prison for "non-cooperative" prisoners. George writes that he and others had gone to the warden to protest racial segregation. Later, when the war has been over a year and the narrator free for six months, the narrator reads about George in the newspaper. George and other inmates (having endured months of solitary) were then fifteen days into a hunger strike, "protesting the continued imprisonment of men who would not kill and the continued drafting of men for the purpose of killing" (DIMH 93). The warden was ready to begin force-feeding the prisoners (94).

An "Epilogue" closes Heart as it opens, with the narrator talking to a sleeping George in the hospital. George, apparently, is being hospitalized either because of fasting or possibly in order to force-feed him. For the narrator, Heart is a story "without heroes and without villains" (DIMH 95). Presumably, George would not share this view. He has taken the side of the "absolute pacifists" for whom the state is coercively evil. To Stafford, this kind of extreme protest, though useful for others, ultimately polarizes people. Stafford's job as a man and a writer, as the narrator puts it to George, is to "keep on saying those things we learned" (DIMH 95). Told by an attendant that he has to leave, the narrator (like one veteran to another) says goodbye to his friend on the edge of death.

In a letter to the author, dated August 25, 1990, Stafford explains that the real "George," however, did not die in 1946: "the narrator was pretty much myself," and "George" survived and struggles on:

George . . . was based on a real person, and in fact all the others . . . were in my mind linked to real, for in the main the events . . . were actual. "George," not his real name, does continue to work; he has stayed militant in the sense that he feels lost without being in a losing fight with the society around him. At least, that's the way I see it. We are friends, though my way is much more quiet--and I guess you could say accommodating than his.

By volunteering for CPS, Stafford went to war with his own culture, and like other "veterans," came out of it transformed. As the years pass, Down in My Heart grows increasingly relevant as a sub-history of peace.

While not World War II heroes in the Audie Murphy sense, the men in CPS performed valuable, often courageous service. In six years, the men of CPS accounted for over "eight million" days of unpaid labor for the United States. Had they been paid like servicemen, such labor would have been worth \$22,000.000. The historic peace churches paid out over seven million dollars in the men's support. In addition to forestry and conservation work (which accounted for most of the labor), the men also worked in hospitals and technical schools, in laboratories, on farms, and survey crews (Keim 40). They volunteered as subjects for typhus, hepatitis, and pneumonia experiments (Keim 75-76). Helping to staff mental health facilities, CPS men distinguished

themselves with their compassion and innovative non-violent patient control techniques.

Down in My Heart attempts to freeze the "texture" of the program in the truth of fiction. Heart does not so much subvert mainstream American history and culture, as it presents an alternative American cultural viewpoint in a digestible form. It is a viewpoint at war with war.

CHAPTER 3

THE CHURCH OF THE BRETHREN AND THE QUAKER WAY

The Church of the Brethren

When Stafford joined Civilian Public Service, he applied for a Society of Friends-administered camp, but, as he explains in a letter to this writer, "there was no opening at the time." Instead he was sent to four successive Brethren-run camps during his four years in CPS. In 1943 Stafford married Dorothy Franz, whose father was a Brethren minister. In addition, immediately after the war, Stafford worked for the Church World Service, an organization in which the Brethren played a major role. His boss there had been the head of Stafford's last CPS camp. Stafford joined the Church of the Brethren briefly after the war. He also taught for a year at North Manchester in Indiana, a Brethren college. In addition, the Brethren Press brought out Stafford's first book, Down in My Heart and later a poetry tribute called A Scripture of Leaves. In the summer of 1991, Stafford spoke at the Annual Conference of the Church of the Brethren.¹⁰

¹⁰From a letter to Don Ball, August 25, 1990

Stafford's Brethren association eventually gave way to a closer identification with the Society of Friends, though the two "peace churches" have much in common. The small, separatist Church of the Brethren, founded in 1708 in Germany, eventually spread to England and then the colonies of Pennsylvania, Virginia, and the Carolinas (Eisan 17). Highly legalistic and anti-worldly, the early Brethren sought to control and isolate their members from the corrupt world, a policy which included rejecting secular organizations and higher education (Sappington 22). The 1804 Annual Meeting admonished Church members that "here and there are believers who gratify too much the lust of the eye and conforming therein themselves to the world" (Sappington 22). In addition to these warnings, throughout the nineteenth century, the Annual Meeting reiterated the Church's opposition to members "holding political office, using the courts, and voting" (Sappington 23). The Brethren took an early stand against slavery and eventually came to "condemn American society as a whole." The Brethren were mostly a rural people and, unlike the materially prosperous Quakers, had an extreme distrust of business (Sappington 25).

By the early twentieth century, however, the Brethren, though still a small sect, had fully embraced all levels of education and had moved the Church's mission more outward to meeting societal needs. The Church sought to minister to

the waves of new immigrants, blacks, Native Americans, and especially to "the children of the factories and of the slums" (Sappington 28).

A central Biblical text for the Brethren is Matthew 18: 1-6.

At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" He called a child, set him in front of them, and said, "I tell you this: unless you turn round and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of Heaven. Let a man humble himself till he is like this child, and he will be the greatest in the kingdom of Heaven. Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me. (qtd. in Eisan 18)

Stafford particularly embraced this Brethren (and Quaker) trait of humility in his life and about his poetry. His simplicity, dedication to social justice and equality, and advocacy for peace all coincide with Brethren values.

The Society of Friends

The Society of Friends, however, ultimately seemed to offer Stafford a better fit for his Christian pacifist ideals, probably because the Quakers were more assertive in their activism. Norman Leavens in his 1983 dissertation repeats the mistaken assumption that Stafford grew up in a Quaker household. Leavens quotes a 1974 Stafford interview with William Heyen and Al Poulin as evidence of Stafford's Quaker background:

Poulin: How much do you think your being a Quaker and conscientious objector has influenced your work?

Stafford: I'm sure it has influenced my work, but part of that assurance, such as it is, comes from

signals I get from the world around me that as a matter of fact where we come from, who we associate with, the kinds of things that we do all the time, do influence us, and the things you mention have been very much a part of my background, and are still part of my foreground, as a matter of fact. And I welcome it. (WTAC 140)

While neither of Stafford's parents were formally affiliated with any church, there is a general connection, nevertheless, to Quakerism. In a letter to me dated June 3, 1991, Stafford explains his parents' religious position:

My parents were not actually Quakers, though they probably could be best tagged as part of "the wider Quaker fellowship" (a description for those who while not having the beliefs do have the social-action programs of the Quakers much at heart). My parents were not believers in a sect; they used the language around them, though, and I suppose they were kind of *socialized church* people.

Apparently, Stafford as a young man chose to identify specifically with the Society of Friends simply because Quakerism was so naturally compatible with his beliefs. In a letter to me, dated August 25, 1990, Stafford explains this longtime association:

President Morgan Odell of Lewis and Clark College used to introduce me as, "Our Quaker." He identified me that way as the fastest path to letting newcomers understand my way of life, my pacifism, and so on. That label is about as close as I can come; and my wife and I contribute regularly to the American Friends Service Committee, for we regularly subscribe to the AFSC social action policies. And when we have lived near a "Silent Meeting" we have attended--in Berkeley, for instance, and in Iowa City.

So while Stafford was careful to resist all other labels, he was comfortable with a general identification with

Quakerism. At the same time, he refused to be pinned down (in his words) as a "believer" in Christianity and felt, like the Friends themselves, that Jesus was one but not the only path to enlightenment and salvation. Stafford easily embraced the anti-authoritarian, pacifist, practically creedless theology of the Society of Friends and marched off to CPS camp in 1942 with a copy of The Journal of John Woolman--a classic of Quaker thought--in his pocket (YMRYL 11).

Quakerism historically was a late, radical brand of Protestantism. Founded by the Englishman George Fox in 1652, its tenets were simple and have not changed appreciably in three hundred years. Fox as a Protestant felt that there should be no priestly mediators between God and humans; and while Quaker pastors exist today--Friends with a gift for speaking--they possess in principle no more religious authority than other Friends. To Fox each Christian, indeed every human being, has the "inner light" of Christ within; each Christian is, therefore, potentially a minister. To mix metaphors (as Quaker writers often do), each Christian must worship by listening for "leadings" from the "inner light" or "seed," or from the "still, small voice of God" and then act upon such guidance (Bacon 5).

This inner voice is to Quakers the voice of "truth"; Quakers early on refused to take oaths for legal testimony because having to take an oath presupposed that at other

times Christians might lie. They also refused to make any political oath to God. In addition, Quakers felt that polite greetings and leave-takings were insincere and tied up in a social tradition of false pride and elitism (Bacon 16).

This egalitarian attitude contributed as well to the Quaker way of talking, which emphasized honesty, brevity, and plain-spokeness. Quakers used the informal "thee" instead of the more formal and ambiguous "you." The Quakers from the beginning set themselves apart as chosen people of God who spoke "the pure language" (Bauman 7). These principles, along with an early commitment to pacifism (since war violated the Golden Rule) put the early Quakers in the precarious position of essentially defying all religious and secular authority and helped ensure immediate and systematic persecution and martyrdom in England and in the American colonies (West 4).

The first Quakers in the New World arrived in 1656, only four years after Fox founded the sect. These New England Quakers were imprisoned, publicly flogged, and exiled by the Puritans (Mary Dyer was even executed) until the Toleration Act of 1689 ended the worst of the violence in Great Britain and abroad (West 4). In 1682 the converted Quaker William Penn established the colony of Pennsylvania as a "Holy Experiment" and a refuge for Quakers and all persecuted groups (Bacon 49).

Increasing prosperity, religious toleration, and sectarianism in eighteenth century America brought on a gradual stagnation of membership and loss of zeal (Bacon 85). In 1828 the Society split into orthodox Friends--predominantly urban, wealthy, and evangelical--and the reformer followers of Elias Hicks. The so-called "Hicksites" espoused a liberal, mystical "quietism," doubting, notably, the Biblical miracles attributed to Jesus (the two factions did not officially reunite until 1955). The Hicksite "quietism" of the nineteenth century generally produced a withdrawal from secular activities (Ingle 86). By contrast, the orthodox Friends led the abolitionist movement in the nineteenth century as well as championing religious liberty, conscientious objection, civil disobedience, and reform in the treatment of Indians, Negroes, prisoners, and the insane (Baker 5).

Quakers in the twentieth century have brought the Society of Friends more into the mainstream of Protestantism. While American Quaker membership is still relatively small, approximately 150,000, the Society has been revitalized because members are no longer "disowned" for marrying outside the faith (Bacon 206). Quaker meetings today fall into either the "programmed" or the "unprogrammed" (orthodox) categories. The unprogrammed meeting generally consists of an hour of silence presided over by elders in which any member may give "testimony" if

so moved by the Inner Light. These silent meetings (in the earliest traditions of the Society) require both an individual and a group receptivity to spiritual "leadings" or "promptings" (Punshon 8). Silent meetings, thus, are rarely completely silent. Individual members typically are moved to speak in intervals, reciting Bible verses, delivering messages to other members, discussing difficult moral decisions, or praying out loud (Baker 6).

The most noted result of this careful attention, this "waiting" upon God, is to prompt the individual and finally the group to social action (Punshon 20). By contrast, the "programmed" tradition today is much like many other Protestant services, complete with professional ministers, music, scripture readings, and sermons, with time as well for silent worship (Punshon 8). Friends have, of course, continued their commitment to social activism throughout the twentieth century. Opposing in principle all wars and war preparation, the Friends also have worked with the other peace churches--the Church of the Brethren and the Mennonites--to help resolve the problem of conscientious objectors. Quakers also were prominent in the Civil Rights Movement as well as in Vietnam War protests and in the anti-nuclear weapons movement (Cooney 30-31).

Instead of Quakerism having influenced Stafford and his poetry, it may be more accurate to say that Stafford's fully formed adult personality and his writing merged with the

Quaker Way. There are many aspects of Quakerism that Stafford welcomed. Beyond the Society's crucial commitment to pacifism and social action, Stafford also adopted a disciplined, devotional writing process analogous both to Quaker journal writing and to the unprogrammed silent meeting. Quaker attention to the meditative concepts of plain-speaking, listening, waiting, and receptivity also fit Stafford's poetics and style of life.

While Stafford never (at least in print) drew his own aesthetic parallel to the process of the silent meeting and his writing process, the similarities are striking. For over fifty years Stafford maintained a daily discipline of early morning writing. He began this practice while working in CPS during the war. Stafford mentions in an autobiographical essay that he regards his daily writing as like keeping a journal ("William" 443). His writing, Stafford relates, serves to keep him consistently "alert" to the inevitable "clashes" between his conscience, the outside world, and his artistic interests: "I felt my morning writings as maintenance work or repair work on my integrity" ("William" 333).

The Journal of John Woolman, which Stafford mentions as having received as a gift before going off to CPS, would certainly have been a ready model for spiritual maintenance. Woolman, an eighteenth-century tailor and traveling Quaker minister from New Jersey (Tolles vi.) relates in his famous

journal his constant moral struggle to understand the truth, live up to its standards, and then share it with others in his travels. Woolman is credited for influencing the Society of Friends to repudiate slavery. His message to the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting in 1758 in particular motivated those Friends in attendance both to free their own slaves and to attempt to persuade others to do so. His travels through the Southern colonies were especially difficult as he witnessed and spoke out against the worst abuses of slavery.

Beyond helping to begin the American and European movement against slavery, Woolman created a journal that is a model of a personal spiritual journey of growth, commitment, and difficult choices. Renouncing his successful pursuit of material wealth as self-centered, Woolman further theorizes that greed for money and power causes war. To Woolman only love's power can overcome the evils of such greed and violence. Begun when he was thirty-six, Woolman's Journal is filled with inner reflection and his examination of motives and actions, both his and others.

One story that Woolman tells from his childhood resonates in its context with Stafford's famous poem "Traveling Through the Dark." In Stafford's poem, the speaker driving at night on a mountain road stops to push a dead deer off the road. Woolman's narrative relates the "remarkable circumstance" of how once as a boy (of

unspecified age) while out walking he saw a robin on her nest

and as I came near she went off; but having young ones, she flew about, and with many cries expressed her concern for them. I stood and threw stones at her, and one striking her she fell down dead. At first I was pleased with the exploit, but after a few minutes was seized with horror, at having, in a sportive way, killed an innocent creature while she was careful for her young. I beheld her lying dead, and thought of those young ones, for want of their dam to nourish them. (2)

Like Stafford's speaker in "Traveling Through the Dark" who also pauses when he realizes the dead doe carries a live fawn, the young Woolman contemplates the fate of the robin's helpless young. The boy's next decision gives us pause as well.

After some painful consideration on the subject, I climbed up the tree, took all the young birds, and killed them, supposing that better than to leave them to pine and die miserably. In this case I believed that Scripture proverb was fulfilled, "The tender mercies of the wicked are cruel." I then went on my errand, and for some hours could think of little else but the cruelties I had committed, and was much troubled. (2-3)

In Stafford's "Traveling," the speaker also feels troubled, though morally obligated to kill the unborn fawn because the mother had been killed. Unlike Stafford's "Traveling," of course, which involves a guiltless adult making a choice that is no choice, Woolman as a child is completely guilty of senseless violence. Woolman's sensitivity at such a young age to the morality of his actions, however, is impressive. In true Quaker fashion, the boy pauses silently

to realize the full moral context and complexity of his conduct, and then he claims responsibility for his thoughtlessness. He also, perhaps, recognizes that such violence is selfish and often begets more violence. Significantly, both the young Woolman and Stafford's speaker in "Traveling"--a poem based on a real experience--choose to act out of conscience even though there are no human witnesses to judge their actions.

The rigorous moral "maintenance" as evidenced in Woolman's Journal demonstrates a courage that must have impressed Stafford as he entered into the unknown moral minefield of CPS in 1942. Certainly keeping a literary and spiritual journal must have seemed an efficient solution to the problem of how to maintain his writing and his integrity. After a day of manual labor, Stafford and his CPS friends found themselves too tired for intellectual activity.

So some of us formed a group to use the "library," a barracks where we put our books together, for early morning activity. We would quietly get up at 4:00 a.m. or so and make our way to the gathering place. . . . We gained alert hours for mental work and the rest of the day for work required of us. Since those days, I have the habit of writing in the early morning. That dawn time is precious: the world is quiet; no one will interrupt; you are rested and ready. ("William" 333)

In his essay "A Way of Writing," Stafford comments further on the importance of writing in a setting that promotes "receptivity":

When I write I like to have an interval before me when I am not likely to be interrupted. For me, this means usually the early morning, before others are awake. I get pen and paper, take a glance out of the window (often it is dark out there), and wait. It is like fishing. But I do not wait very long, for there is always a nibble--and this is where receptivity comes in. To get started I will accept anything that occurs to me. Something always occurs, of course, to any of us. We can't keep from thinking. Maybe I have to settle on an immediate impression: it's cold, or hot, or dark, or bright, or in between! Or--well, the possibilities are endless. If I put down something, that thing will help the next thing come, and I'm off. If I let the process go on, things will occur to me that were not at all in my mind when I started. These things, odd or trivial as they may be, are somehow connected. And if I let them string out, surprising things will happen. (WTAC 17)

To Stafford, process is everything in writing: "A writer is not so much someone who has something to say as he is someone who has found a process that will bring about new things he may not have thought of if he had not started to say them" (WTAC 17).

The receptivity and immediacy of Stafford's writing process recalls the Quaker method of silent worship--though obviously Stafford is alone while Quaker meetings are corporate (or perhaps, to draw out the comparison, Stafford's readers form the rest of the congregation). The English Quaker John Sykes, in describing the typical phases of a silent meeting, uses language that echoes Stafford's remarks about his writing process. The first two phases, as Sykes describes them, involve "settling down to quiet followed by a kind of preparation: "a Taoist flexibility

towards all that intrudes . . . Gone are distinctions of they and me, or of race or colour, or such like" (23). When properly prepared and receptive, members receive the same kinds of everyday signals Stafford does when he writes.

Sykes explains the silent worship experience:

In wide terms what is happening is the most commonplace experience. All the time our conscious minds are being peppered with signals from beyond consciousness, most of them unnoticed, but a few taken up as bright ideas or flashes of wit, or intuition about other people. In times of crisis such as war, or personal suffering, or love, they overwhelm us; we imagine we are poets, or psychic.

Sykes goes on to link this Quaker meditative process both to poetry and to prophecy:

Indeed, it is the usually receptive people like poets or religious prophets who unceasingly receive such messages from sly insinuations of insight to gigantic visions with voices that become the stuff of revelation and myth; and their task is to control what they receive, to make it serviceable for others, as a means of widening consciousness and for readjusting daily life . . . (25-26)

Thus the process of Quaker worship concerns receiving messages directly from God by both listening to outward promptings and also hearing what Quakers variously call "the Inner Guide, the Good Angel, the Atman, the Light of Christ within . . . the Seed, the Witness, and That of God in every man" (28).

Several Stafford poems offer themselves as verse commentaries on his composing process. In "Mornings" from Allegiances (1970), a poem in four numbered parts, the first

word (and line) and last of each part recalls features of the silent meeting: "Quiet," "Waiting," "Lowly," and "Light." The first section of the poem establishes the speaker in the typical Stafford early morning position: reverent, alert, aware of both sides of the window. The speaker is ready to follow his imagination.

1.

Quiet,
rested the brain begins to burn
and glow like a coal in the dark,
early--four in the morning, cold with
frost on the lawn. The brain feels
the two directions of window . . .

While apparently inside himself, the speaker also welcomes signals from the outside world by the act of calling them.

. . . All benevolence,
the brain with its insistent little call
summons wraiths and mist layers near
from fields . . .

What is crucial here is the daily act of will in which the artist lets his true self respond to all the materials of thought and feeling and sense, relying for guidance on the "insistent little call" of the brain.

In part two the speaker waits for words to come and make their tentative connections.

2.

Waiting

in the town that flows for the brain, charmed,
weak as distance, no one can move or belong
till the brain finds them and says, "Live!"

The "brain," which is the imagination in the act of writing, draws on a "town that flows"--another one of Stafford's rivers--and creates life. A certain "phantom" though eludes

the speaker's reach "who floats into my dream / again," like a person waking up to the fading traces of a dream. The speaker literally feels the power of the creative spirit in the movement of his writing hand, "I feel a wind inside my hand," and we arrive at a typical Stafford aphorism and paradox: "By a lack that our life knows, life owns its greatness: / we are led one thing at a time through gain / to that pure gain--all that we lose."

This facility that humanity has for searching for what it lacks, to Stafford contains a fleeting "greatness." The search is both successful and inevitably failed because humans are so limited. The movement of writing here is like dancing--a common Stafford metaphor--and the partner, the "Stranger," here is possibly the reader who the speaker suddenly addresses, shifting the point of view:

Stranger,
we are blind dancers in two different rooms;
we hear the music both heard long ago: wherever
you dance, that music finds you. When you turn,
I turn.

So the poet and reader make the art--the dance--together, though "blind" to each other in space and time. In such a meeting between artist and audience, just as in a silent meeting, the participants do not only "dance" to the music of the moment, but rather the dance itself creates the music; the process itself, in motion, makes the art.

The third section of the poem, beginning "Lowly," shows Stafford's speaker characteristically displaying not just

Quaker humility but also a willed movement of the human spirit towards nature:

3.

Lowly,

I listen as fur hears the air, and by will
I think one thing at a time while the world,
complete, turns--

The speaker-as-poet gives two gifts to the world, early morning art and daylight labor: "My hands have given their gift, / then themselves." Like a Quaker, the speaker must act on his prayerful meditation.

In the fourth section, the "Inner Light" of the poet is joined by the dawn which also breaks the speaker's "trance":

4.

Light

comes inside the brain . . .

. . .
in that clear light the brain comes home, lost
from all it wandered in . . .

. . .
the sun comes over the world, aiming
the trees at the day, hill by hill.
Light.

We find another verse example of the Stafford process in the poem "The Way I Write" from Passwords (1991). The process is again its own subject. The speaker is lying down in Stafford's familiar writing position, the tense is the Quaker present, and the imagination welcomes and blends, as often happens in Quaker worship, both inner promptings and outward signals from nature:

In the mornings I lie partly propped up
the way Thomas Jefferson did when he slept
at Monticello. Then I stop and
look away like Emily Dickinson when
she was thinking about the carriage and the fly.

Allusions to history and literature are sporadic and casual in Stafford's poetry. Jefferson, who did indeed like to sleep propped up on pillows at Monticello, is an American symbol of the Age of Reason, egalitarianism (and aristocracy), independence, and of the perfectibility of humanity (Randall 594). (Quakers also believe in human perfectibility in contrast to Calvinists.) Jefferson, whose wide-ranging curiosity and successful application of political and scientific theory (particularly his view that government should serve the people) is a congenial model for Stafford's view of the possibilities of the creative intellect.

Similarly, Emily Dickinson, whom Stafford once described as one of America's greatest poets (WTAC 89), was able, though she lived a proscribed domestic life, to reach out with her genius to grasp the full range of life and death. Her "carriage" as it appears in "Because I Could Not Stop For Death" suggests the hearse that stops for everyone, no matter how busy or ill-prepared. The "fly" meanwhile of "I Heard a Fly Buzz When I Died" further symbolizes our attraction to the motion and sound of life even at its most insignificant, even at the moment of death. Both carriage and fly--representing genteel human ritual and carrion nature--accompany the mysterious process of dying in Dickinson's poetry without offering easy answers. Stafford, the careful listener, surely would have appreciated that the

common sounds of passing carriages and buzzing flies offered uncommon creative materials for Dickinson.

Stafford's speaker bounces from Jefferson to Dickinson to Blaise Pascal, seventeenth century mathematician and theologian: "When someone disturbs me I come back / like Pascal from those infinite spaces." Pascal's great faith leads the speaker to think of other spiritual adventurers, Saint Teresa and Dante. Stafford's speaker is brought back gratefully from such spiritual intensity to "my own kind sky and mouse-nibble sound of now." Such human fervor is characteristically ignored by the changing natural processes that proceed oblivious to the changing human condition:

The sky has waited a long time
for this day. Trees have reached out,
the river has scrambled to get where it is.
And here I bring any little mind
to the edge of the ocean and let it think.

The movement of the mind and spirit, however, though limited and temporal is also a powerful natural force like the waves:

. . .
The ocean and I have many pebbles
to find and wash off and roll into shape.

"The Way I Write" demonstrates the Stafford process: the seeking, creative mind itself is its own justification, and when in action it leads the thinkers of the world to the difficult questions; questions that ask not only what the world is now, but, to paraphrase Stafford, what the world is trying to be.

"What happens to all these rocks?" "They become sand." "And then?" My hand stops. Thomas Jefferson, Emily Dickinson, Pascal, Dante--they all pause too. The sky waits. I lean forward and write.

Stafford believed strongly that "intention endangers creation" in writing poetry. In other words, the poet should begin, and stay with, the creative process without notions of wisdom or verse technique; as a matter of fact Stafford claims that "Technique used for itself will rot your soul" (YMRYL 78). Analogously, for Quakers it is similarly vital they approach silent worship without a rehearsed personal agenda and without the preconception of either speaking out or being silent (Trueblood 86)

In his essay "A Witness for Poetry," Stafford explains why writing is for him a voyage of discovery rather than a drawing from a "reservoir" of ideas (a reservoir is too static in any case for a river traveller like Stafford). The well-known Quaker phrase "the still, small voice" and the characteristic Quaker features of democracy and silence are prominent here:

My kind of assertion is to give individuals [writers and readers] plenty of room in which to make their own decisions . . . To me democracy isn't the process in which any group that is loud enough or rich enough can impose ideas on another group. Democracy is a situation in which we don't try to overwhelm each other. We value what each other has to give. We all have brass bands and demonstrations, but the still, small voice of reason is what I keep trying to protect in myself and cherish in others. (YMRYL 60)

Quaker democracy is profoundly different from American politics in which power is dispensed from a simple majority vote after intensely competitive, often cutthroat campaigns. Decisions in Quaker annual meetings, by way of contrast, require a unanimity of feeling which often is only arrived at after painfully extended discussion, and many times postponed for lack of consensus. Such discussions are respectful and often marked by stretches of silence. No votes are taken on decisions but rather a clerk records the sense of the meeting. Stafford's poetics echo these Quaker attitudes:

Don't tell me what forensic speakers have forced on you. Relax, forget them . . . I'm using quiet forensics in my poems. The power of that, and its great gain over the other kind, the loud kind, is that it incorporates those silences and gives each side a time to think. The silences are important . . . (VMRYL 60-61).

All of this reserve and humility is, of course, very Quaker-like. Stafford refuses a poetic stance that is loudly "forensic"--that proclaims some truth. His poems are rather imaginative experiences in language which may or may not discover any truth at all, either worldly or aesthetic. Rather than imposing some powerful romantic, heroic vision upon the world, Stafford's kind of poet explores and discovers, as the father tells the son in the poem "Vocation," what the world is becoming: "'Your job is to find out what the world is trying to be'" (TTTD 94). And since the world is made up of ever evolving processes of

becoming, to Stafford a poet must get in motion daily just to keep up.

Stafford alters the famous Quaker phrase the "still, small voice of the Christ within" to the "still, small voice of reason" in his discussion of poetics. But then Stafford seems to "reason" as much spiritually as intellectually. He is also reluctant to proselytize his readers in any specifically Christian way. This reluctance may involve a fear of secular rejection or, what is more likely, a feeling that telling readers what to believe violated his idea that an agenda is the enemy of art because it closes off the writer and reader from the necessary immediacy of artistic experience. Stafford has no problems with being morally didactic in general (as opposed to specifically Christian) as long as the didacticism works artistically (WTAC 131).

Quaker meetings, like sessions of poetry writing, do not always, of course, achieve spiritual unity. Sykes explains that if a meeting achieves its goal (in what he calls the fourth phase), the congregation "centers down" into a single mind: "all irrelevant signals, thoughts, impulses, are dying away, displaced or transformed by the overreaching power that reflects God's Spirit among the worshippers" (29). Unfortunately, success or failure in meetings is unpredictable, and faithful, disciplined group attendance, therefore, is required.

This kind of disciplined effort squares with Stafford's daily early morning writing. Stafford's fifty-year effort produced thousands of poems. According to Stafford, most never got sent out and only about a tenth ever got published (WTAC 124). Stafford resolutely refused to worry about his many unfinished poems or those many rejected. His job, he always felt, was to write and not to judge, which may be why he wrote so little criticism of others' work.

So, receptive, careless of failure, I spin out things on the page. And a wonderful freedom comes. If something occurs to me, it is all right to accept it. It has one justification: it occurs to me. No one else can guide me. I must follow my own weak, wandering, diffident impulses. (WTAC 18)

Writing "failed" poems, consequently, is to Stafford an inevitable part of the persistent activity of writing. The important thing to Stafford is to get into motion and write; if the fear of failure keeps one from writing, then that fear produces the true tragedy.

Stafford mentions Auden as a poet who became "too adept" at technique and "feared repeating himself" as his career progressed (WTAC 66). Auden, therefore, according to Stafford, placed too much emphasis on the artistic product and not enough on the all-important process of engaging in art. Stafford uses the Quaker term "center" to describe the inevitability of repetition in poetry: "And Auden's own best poems stumble into each other again and again, seeking a center that belongs there." Stafford feels that it is

necessary for poets to follow whatever "leadings" surface without regard to artistic "success": "A poet must write bad poems; as they come, among the better, and not scorn the 'bad' ones To avoid the flaws might lead to one big flaw--the denying of leads that carry the writer on" (WTAC 67).

When fear of failure or self-parody keeps people from the process of art, Stafford believes, civilization suffers from self-censorship. Stafford's poem "Burning a Book" from A Glass Face in the Rain (1983) reinforces this idea of the importance of the free expression of art. In the name of being radically free, he apparently once tried out what most people associate with Nazi repression: "I even experimented with the wild bitter flavor of being a book burner. It seemed to me that living in a free country and not testing foregone conclusions would be a loss in anyone's life" ("William" 338).

Protecting each other, right in the center
a few pages glow a long time.
The cover goes first, then outer leaves
curling away, then spine and a scattering.
Truth, brittle and faint, burns easily,
its fire as hot as the fire lies make--

Although Stafford reveres books, he does not defend writing that pretends to significance:

And some books ought to burn, trying for character
but just faking it.

When writers do not look for their own truth in the creative act, perhaps because they seek some artificial commercial

success, they create lies. Furthermore, when books are not written because of the fear of failure, the world is abandoned to terror:

More disturbing than book ashes are whole libraries that no one got around to writing--desolate towns, miles of unthought in cities, and the terrorized countryside where wild dogs own anything that moves. If a book isn't written, no one needs to burn it--ignorance can dance in the absence of fire.

The "book ashes" of censorship are dangerous, but self-censorship out of concern about the harsh judgment of others is the greater threat to free expression.

The objective, therefore, of Stafford's poetry is to receive and work with the "sequential signals and adjustments toward an always-arriving present" (WTAC 66). The ultimate goal of this process is to participate in an experience that is separate from life experience, yet at the same time that grounds the writer (and sometimes the reader) in the world as it rushes past. As Stafford once said in an address to the Rocky Mountain Writers' Conference: "What I am trying to emphasize here is that getting into the process [of writing] reinforced my life" ("When Writers" 18). To Stafford what writers should teach one another is not correct rules and techniques but "recklessness":

And then . . . we can go home and be more a part of our own lives and maybe the lives of others. I don't mean that we should do this in a vain, glorious way, but rather as participants in a life that otherwise slips past us without yielding to us the enrichments that are there, that are hovering there for us to get. (18)

Stafford follows with a quote from Milton (from "The Reason of Church Government"), which Stafford used to carry around, concerning the preparation for and process of writing. A writer according to Milton works

. . . by devout prayer to that eternal Spirit who can enrich with all utterance and knowledge and sends out his seraphim, with the hallowed fire of his altar, to touch and purify the lips of whom he pleases; to this must be added industrious and select reading, steady observation, insight into all seemly and generous arts and affairs. (qtd. in "When Writers" 19)

Stafford seconds Milton's blend of faith and poetry in his essay "Writing: The Discovery of Daily Experience": "Art has its sacramental aspect. The source of art's power is one with religion's: the discovery of the essential self and the cultivation of it through the act of its positive impulses" (51). Stafford holds the Quaker viewpoint that the world, and therefore common daily experience, is sacramental and interconnected and mysterious. Stafford's dedication in his chapbook Stories, Storms and Strangers appropriately reads, "For all the ordinary miracles."

Stafford has often been criticized for his prosaic, unpolished style. This humble approach to language parallels Barclay's description of Quakerism as "Christianity writ plain" (Trueblood 63). The Quaker "plain style" of language comes from the historical mistrust of Latin rhetoric as associated with the Catholic Church (Bauman 2). Stafford also was suspicious of language

composed for rhetorical effect rather than "discovered" in the process of creation.

Many opine that a writer, and particularly a poet, for some reason, must love language; often there is even a worshipful attitude assumed . . . it happens that insofar as I can assess my own attitudes in relation to others' I have an unusually intense distrust of language The highest we know is high for us, but its communication is an interior, not an absolute, phenomenon. And I cringe to realize that my own saying of my own kind of truth is hazardous at best. Language--others' and my own--is very thin. (WTAC 58)

In an interview with Claire Cooperstein, Stafford explains his skepticism as Quaker-like towards the kind of social address that has become formulaic:

And I go to elaborate evasions to keep from taking part in rituals from which the meaning has evaporated or been put under such a strain that it cannot be relied on. At the end of letters I say such things as 'Adios' rather than the usual ritual. Quakers, and I'm sort of one, don't 'swear' in a court; they affirm. Such care strikes some as odd, but not me. I feel like that. (31)

Stafford goes on to relate this Quaker tentativeness about language to poets and the search for truth:

In oppressed societies poets are notorious for allowing the truth to seep by various means into their apparently innocuous poems Maybe even writing poems is a lifelong attempt to get something said right, whatever it is, no matter how trivial, just so it steers its course away from empty language and toward as much truth as circumstance will allow. (31)

Stafford's exploratory, meditative poems, in other words, search for truth but often without the commensurate ability to capture and communicate what there is to find: "'Truth,' or 'wonder,' or any kind of imaginative counterpart of

'absolute realities'--these I certainly do not expect in human communication'" (31). Stafford believes that written language is imprecise, a "treacherous medium" whose effects are at best "cumulative."

It is that cumulative potential in language that writers find themselves relying on again and again as they fearfully advance, leaving behind some of the purposes and aims they started with and accepting the wondrous bonuses that chance and the realizing elements of the future's approach allows them. Le mot juste does not exist. For people, the truth does not exist. (32)

Stafford believes that people are too limited to ever grasp absolute truth; what he has been concerned with, as he explains to Gail Miller, is pursuing the subjective version: the "felt truth" of the moment. Miller asks Stafford about Richard Hugo's remark (she paraphrases) that "truth has to conform to music even if it doesn't." Stafford replies that

I understand that . . . in terms of literature. That's right because that's what literature is about and what truth is about I don't know. But what *felt truth's* about I know a lot about; that's what literature's about: the feeling of it. My assumption is that we human beings don't arrive at truth anyway. It's not something we have control over at all. (YMLYL 110-111)

Stafford's attitude towards revision follows this Quaker mistrust of language. In an interview with Sanford Pinsker, Stafford explains that rather than looking for the modernist *mot juste* in revision, he is more concerned with the movement of the process:

Usually when somebody says "revise" they think that means "cutting down" or something like that. I feel revise means "More . . . more . . . more." And, of course, there comes a time when you don't

force everything into print. . . . But the feeling at the time is not that this poem is bad, but that there must be other. And there must be more. So I drift back through the poem with something of the same welcoming feeling I had when I began. I may get different signals and change something, but it's not changing them with a stern face. Rather it's a welcoming one. (YMRYL 118)

Stafford, the anti-modernist, also rejects the idea of revising for the artistic product, *l'objet d'art*: "For me, poetry is not like the jeweller's craft . . . polishing, polishing, always rubbing it more and more. It's more like the exhilaration of getting somewhere (123). There is a sense too that Stafford worries that any "felt truths" discovered in the original composition might be lost or manipulated rhetorically by extensive revision, certainly a Quaker attitude about the power of spontaneity. In his essay "A Witness for Poetry," he explains that even conversation is often subject to rapid revision:

I suppose that is one thing that makes us nervous. When someone tells us something, we don't know how many versions they have tried out inside before the one we hear. Some people are too good at this. If I write something down, I don't feel secure about it until I have gone back and read it with the knowledge I have accumulated through having written it down the first time. . . . But in writing, it is writing the beginning without knowledge of the end (60)

Revision, therefore, to Stafford is not a different, refining process: "It's just the same process, going back through the same terrain again . . . seeing if the signals are different" (WTAC 104). To Stafford's thinking, therefore, poems that are more than a week old are not good

subjects for revision because the original moment is past (105).

The poems resulting from what Stafford describes as his "organic process" are often prosy and unwieldy. Prayerful, meditative, filled with Quaker terminology and attitudes, Stafford's poems also often glow with the optimism of the new day reveling in the silence of nature. In his poem "Every Morning All Over Again," included in a section Stafford calls "Poems About Writing" in You Must Revise Your Life, Stafford seems to compare walking through the woods with his writing process:

Only the world guides me.
Weather pushes, or when it entices
I follow. Some kind of magnetism
turns me when I am walking
in the woods with no intentions.

Stafford's walker-poet, in other words, will find guidance if he accepts himself as simply another natural force who is alternately propelled and then drawn through the world without imposing his intention, his power, on it.

There are leadings without any
reason, but they attract;
if I find there is nothing to gain
from them, I still follow--their power
is the power of the surrounding world.

The path through the forest, thus, the Quaker Way, involves relinquishing human control, requires sailing in the language rather than selling it.

But things that promise, or those
that serve my purposes--they
interfere with the pure wind

from nowhere that sustains a kite,
or a gull, or a free spirit.

In order to live fully and prayerfully in the world, one must follow the Quaker "leadings" of the inner spirit rather than the worn map of human tradition.

So, afloat again every morning,
I find the current: all the best
rivers have secret channels that
you have to find by whispering
like this, and then hear them and follow.

Stafford's basic poetic themes and approaches remain constant during his long career. A generally optimistic author, Stafford writes about childhood memories; his immediate family; walking, running, and climbing through nature; and history. The poems in his eleven books, indeed, flow into each other (dozens actually overlap, appearing in more than one book) as though into one massive homogeneous work like Whitman's Leaves of Grass.

One might wonder in fact--given Stafford's sort of alogical, trance-like, let-it-be writing process--why his poetry never takes off into more radical directions of form and subject. In response to Cynthia Lofsnness's question concerning his reaction to Eliot's idea that "Poetry is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality," Stafford explains that he does not feel a "separation between the artist and the person in the immediacy of his experience . . . writing . . . is a process of relying on immediate pervasive feelings, not an escape from them at all" (88). What might seem to others to be

changing poetic masks, Stafford compares to the process of thinking which is completely open to impulse: "so the poem may be wildly various, but I'm relying on little impulses that seem very close, exactly congruent to the self that I use in other negotiations" (88).

Clinton Larson, a Mormon professor at Brigham Young, attempts to pin Stafford down about his Christian beliefs in a 1982 letter interview. Stafford includes this interview, which he entitles "The Poet as Religious Moralist" in his collection You Must Revise Your Life. In the introduction to this interview, Stafford acknowledges that he "did dodge about" Larson's questions, while conceding that Christian values are "lavishly present" in his poetry, though generally "homogenized" throughout: "And behind the explicit statements there are no doubt prevalent residues and assumptions--substructuring--from the whole wealth of Scripture-reading, church-going, and society-listening parts of my life" (67).

Stafford consistently protests the value of source studies concerning a writer like himself as too limited because he writes from a "tradition of total experience." His religious beliefs, therefore, are, for example, only a part of his life experience. He often claims in fact that the most powerful influence on his poetry has been the sound of his mother's skeptical voice. Still, though he feels "reckless" in his poetic "experiments," his true self never

loses sight of God.

My sense of the nature of God is neither firm nor infirm; it is just there . . . Whatever it is I have--I do have something that serves me unfailingly . . . My belief is just something like where north is to a compass: I can sway; I can be confused. But north is still there. (69)

Stafford replies to Larson that his most meaningful religious experience was not in a church but "on the banks of the Cimarron River in western Kansas one mild summer evening, when sky, air, birdcalls, and the setting sun combined to expand the universe for me and to give me a feeling of being sustained, cherished, included somehow in a great reverent story" (69). Stafford, in fact, declares that the whole world is his home, and that though he used to literally try to get lost in the wilderness, he never could (YMRYL 5). God and the North Star merge for Stafford into a constant signal.

Stafford also observes to Larson that "church services are poetry from beginning to end" (69) and that though most church-goers fail to make that connection, "Religion is serious poetry" (70). These "Christian values" that Stafford recognizes as "permeating" his poetry are inimical to the material values involved in literary ambition and the marketing of writing to sell to various audiences (69). Commercialism in art to Stafford raises the specter of competition. "Competition for names" in poetry, says Stafford, is a dangerous outside influence that "corrupts the angel in us that relates to art" (WTAC 63). In

Stafford's view, too many poets, and especially student poets, write in an environment where they come to depend on immediate positive reinforcement from others. Stafford argues instead that a poet should only depend upon the "validation" of the moment of the experience of writing: "The distinction of the artist is this working in the presence of the recording angel at all times" (63). Stafford believes that anything like ambition or competition that takes a poet away from the simple present act subverts art: "We know the turmoil and dishonesty and pride and jealousy, and breakdown, that flourish in competitive life" (63).

Stafford's attitude towards "competition for names" is especially ironic considering how famous he himself became. He wrote leisurely by his own account, reclined on his couch, but at some point, after some revision, he also typed these efforts up in his Oregon garage study and sent them off by the hundreds ("William" 335). This laborious, relentless effort and eventual success has the ring of some kind of ambition for recognition. Perhaps because he did so much of this work before his usual teaching day, and since he never showed his poetry to his family or friends before the editors got it, he may have regarded his effort as literally subterranean--that is, beneath everyday American culture. He once said that every poem he writes is a "quiet protest poem" (Heyen 143) against American culture in

general and American literary elitism and competition in particular.

Stafford's natural bent, by upbringing and experience, is to move away from the self-centeredness of competition and towards reconciliation. Replying to Cynthia Lofsness's question concerning what he would like "the American people to recognize about themselves," Stafford remarks that

. . . I would like to try to help the American people see the possibilities of reconciliation. I don't find myself in harmony with the current style of the politics of overcoming . . . I have a kind of feeling for empathy with others, including extremely different others. (109)

Stafford acknowledges that the peace that comes from mutual understanding and reconciliation has always been elusive and must be worked for.

I would like to be able to meet all kinds of people, including the enemy . . . under conditions [Stafford is writing in the 1970s], I would like to maximize the conditions of meeting them so as to bring us to perceive our mutual interests, rather than to drive them farther away. It's a way of life that hasn't prevailed, it hasn't brought peace into the world, but we share that frustration with a lot of other people. (110)

Stafford and his wife Dorothy's longtime support for the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) displays Stafford's internationalism. Founded in 1917 by American Quakers for war relief work in France, AFSC was formally organized in 1924 into four parts: "foreign service, home service, interracial work, and peace work" (Keim 130). Since then the AFSC has provided food to the families of striking coal miners, helped farm families during the

Depression, and--working with the Brethren and Mennonites--sponsored peace workshops. In 1947 AFSC and its British chapter won the Nobel Peace Prize for post-war relief work. In addition to protesting the nuclear arms race, the AFSC came to the conclusion that the acceptance of violence has caused and perpetuated such problems as world poverty and colonialism and blocked disarmament and the possibility of world government. During America's involvement in Vietnam, Friends from AFSC organized war protests and counseled draft resisters (131).

When Stafford took part in Vietnam War protests on campuses (he mentions Kent State, Stanford, Berkeley, and Madison), because most of the protestors were opposed specifically to Vietnam and not to war in general, when protests turned unruly and violent, Stafford felt estranged:

My grounds for being welcomed by students were odd, too. World War II would have been supported by most of those around me; most activists were not pacifists but were political partisans, many of them ready for violence. That violence, it seemed to me, helped bring on the Nixon reaction. Both sides spread out leaving pacifists where they usually were, alone. ("William" 337)

Stafford's sense of isolation from an unreconciled human world clashes with the belonging he feels regarding God's natural creation. His poems are likely to go anywhere, but inevitably, like rivulets, find their way to the submerged river of a pacifist movement that runs deep and unseen within the American mainstream.

CHAPTER 4

MODERNISM, ANTI-INTELLECTUALISM, AND ROBERT FROST

Stafford's four-year experience in the Civilian Public Service (1942-46) thoroughly altered his subsequent life. His CO experience solidified what was to become a lifelong commitment to pacifism and reconciliation. His marriage to the daughter of a Church of the Brethren minister in 1943 also ensured that he would remain within the "pacifist family" even after leaving CPS in 1946. Interested in Quakerism before the war, Stafford renewed his exploration afterward. He was particularly drawn to the Society of Friends' social activism. In addition, Stafford found a writing process in CPS that allowed him to become voluminously productive even while working full-time later as a college professor.

Modernist Complaints

Stafford's CPS camp experience caused him to rebel as well against any political or artistic authority that inhibited his radically free, non-intellectual writing approach. He began to transfer his pacifist skepticism about government officialdom towards the Modernist, New Critical literary powers that be. He describes his first

book of essays about writing poetry, Writing the Australian Crawl (1978), as a discussion of his "pacifist disquiets" about the competitive, "forensic," prescriptive manner in which poetry writing is usually taught in colleges ("William" 334).

Richard Kostelanetz in his The Old Poetries and the New (1981) associates Stafford with a general post-World War II American opposition to Modernism:

Since Eliot and Pound dealt with large abstractions, spectacularly cosmic concerns and distant places, another reaction was toward a poetry that focussed upon immediate perceptions, pedestrian experiences, and natural landscapes. (28)

Kostelanetz includes Stafford, Gary Snyder, Richard Eberhart, Kenneth Rexroth and others in this grouping:

Nearly all of them produced comparatively short poems, emphasizing image over symbol and subjectivity over objectivity, in lines varying from metered to free, generally in an authentic first-person voice whose tone occasionally echoes Robert Frost. The subject of these poems is usually an experience or quality distinct of the premachine age. . . . past literature is sometimes seen as threatening [the poet's] perceptual innocence. (29)

Paul Zweig in reviewing Stafford's Someday, Maybe (1973) (which he incorrectly titles Sometimes Maybe) lambastes the book as an example of the spoken, "unliterary" poetry of the 1960s playing itself out:

As with any language which settles into a code and a set of conventions, the conversational style of the 1960's has gradually discovered its limits. All too often "honesty" has become a formula, slack rhythms a vehicle for unfocused energy, smallness of perception a form of avoidance. The

enormous release which many poets experienced in the early 1960's has been replaced by mannerism of release. (605)

Anti-Intellectualism

Stafford's non-literary style, his emphasis on present experience over traditional history, and his indifference to technique have encouraged some to charge him with anti-intellectualism as well. Alan Williamson in Introspection and Contemporary Poetry (1984) asserts that Stafford's poetry is indeed "anti-intellectual" as evidenced by his

indifference to the whole technical aspect of poetry. . . . Formal meter is rare, but so is any organic relation between form and specific content, of the type recommended by Williams and his followers." (101)

While Stafford himself hardly advocated anti-intellectualism, he did agree that his path as a poet was an unusual one. He did not see himself in the line of any particular literary tradition, nor did he derive the inspiration for or content of his poetry from literature, at least not specifically or solely from it.

In a 1981 interview, Nancy Bunge asked whether Stafford's time studying for a Ph.D. at Iowa (1950-52) was "particularly valuable" to him as a writer:

Was the time at Iowa crucial? I don't mean to demean Iowa by saying, "No, that was not crucial." For one thing, I went there pretty late in my writing [at 36]; for another, I don't think any one time is crucial. (YMLYR 78)

As a married older student and an ex-CO, Stafford already felt separate from his fellow students at Iowa; his ideas about writing only increased the distance:

Part of my disquiet was that people were trying to write good poems and stories; that is, they were learning from each other about techniques. They were even reading in order to find out how to do it. Sacrilege! (YMRYL 15)

None of this means that Stafford was against reading, on the contrary. In interviews Stafford mentions American and British authors with familiarity and admiration, including Robert Lowell, Emily Dickinson, Willa Cather, Mark Twain, George Eliot, Jane Austen, and Thomas Hardy (Lofsnness 90-91). Stafford actually taught more American and English literature courses than creative writing at Lewis and Clark College. Immersed in academia as he was for thirty-two years, Stafford was hardly some anti-intellectual terrorist. Stafford's complaint about the Modernists had to do with the writing process, which he preferred to liken to swimming the "Australian crawl" in the language rather than sculpting ideas and form.

In his essay "Whose Tradition?" (1978)--a response to Eliot's "Tradition and the Individual Talent"--Stafford aligns himself with what he describes as a democratic revolution in American poetry in opposition to the elitism of the Pound-Eliot tradition:

It is time--past time--for critics to accept a change that has come about in current poetry. Today a grotesque discrepancy is widening between critical formulations and what thousands of people

are experiencing in their reading and writing. The "tradition" from which individual talents are deriving has transformed, but the old terminology is lingering and making a separation between writers and the authorities who identify and teach and analyze their work. (WTAC 76)

Stafford's populist point, which he makes repeatedly, is that literary influence upon most contemporary writers is too involved with other life influences for critics to sort out or trace successfully--and is, in fact, irrelevant for many writers. Most contemporary poets, Stafford argues in 1978, are now writing from a "tradition of total experience" so that typical literary influence studies are essentially too limited (WTAC 78). Form too, argues Stafford, is often unconventional in modern poetry and is usually created by the poet for the individual poem (78).

Stafford's objection to Modernism surely comes, in part, out of his CO experience, which he once likened to living in a "concentration camp" for four years (WTAC 142). By contrast to such an experience, a world of art bounded primarily by aesthetic ideas and made meaningful mostly by other artists must have seemed too narrow, too artificial, and perhaps too secular for the former "prisoner." Stafford, upon liberation, was more interested in a daily, present-tense celebration of life than writing from received tradition.

Stafford and Frost

Stafford's strangely personal rejection of Robert Frost best illuminates, perhaps, Stafford's perception of himself

as one whose methods profoundly oppose the political power of established traditional poets and critics. As has been noted earlier, a common thread in Stafford criticism has been to compare him to Frost, especially in terms of his use of nature. Stafford's irritation at what seems a "natural" comparison (pun intended) is initially puzzling. It makes more sense, however, when viewed in the greater context of Stafford's understanding of Frost's life.

In a 1972 interview with Stafford, Cynthia Lofsnness casually asks Stafford what he thinks about Frost as a literary icon (she does not even make the inevitable comparison between the two poets). She receives a reply from Stafford that startles considering the always patient, self-effacing source:

What do you think of Robert Frost? Why do you think he was singled out as THE American poet?

Well, I can't help thinking that part of Frost's centrality in American life comes from qualities that are not necessarily good, or not necessarily important for poetry. He lived a long time, he showed up well in photographs, and you know, he came from the right part of the country . . . His reputation just followed the tide of the pioneers and so on. (99)

Lofsnness does not ask Stafford what he means by "the tide of the pioneers"; we might guess from other of Stafford's remarks that he is referring to Frost being in tune with America's general expansion westward and as a world power. Lofsnness's next question strikes a nerve (the description of tone is hers):

What about his reputation as the wise old New Englander, and the Backwoods Prophet?

[In a sharp tone] I don't feel he was wise at all; his political advice seemed to me poisonous, and his influence on politics, if he had any, just seems to me feedbacks of stereotypes. So I don't consider him a seer at all or wise man or prophet or anything like that. But he was a tenacious old guy who wrote some interesting poems. (99)

Nowhere in Stafford's many interviews and essays does he express anything approaching this kind of scorn, or even strong emotion, for another poet. Excessively humble, gentle, and generous, Stafford often absorbed severe criticism himself without a hint of rebuttal or self-defense.¹¹

When Stafford is asked in a later interview with Michael Bugeja about his bristling reaction toward Frost, he answers ambivalently:

. . . he [Frost] had this really impressive ability to coast along in the mainstream of the American language. You just read his sentences, and they are wonderfully flexible and rewarding. But I think that the reservations come because he took heroic stances. To me he was a dangerous old guy, as well as being an important one. He had this idea of bravery, and he was aggressive about being a champion. Thinkers can't be that, simply--aggressive in the mind. Heroic stances are interesting in drama, but they don't get you anywhere in thinking . . . (32)

To say that Frost was a "dangerous old guy" is to simultaneously take measure of his power and then, paradoxically, dismiss him as outdated and ineffectual. The

¹¹For instance, the criticisms of Roger Dickinson-Brown and Mark Strand, in particular, seemed to take Stafford's simplicity as a personal offense.

troubling part of Frost for Stafford has to do with this undefined "heroic stance."

Certainly the two poets compare, at least broadly, in style and subject matter. Stafford's style, like Frost's, is simple, aphoristic, and conversational. Both poets locate many of their subjects in nature and use "country things" to suggest human emotions and relationships. The activities, particularly the farm activities, that abound in Frost--mowing and turning the hay, mending walls, picking apples and blueberries, wood chopping--are paralleled somewhat in Stafford's own many outdoor processes including walking, jogging, trapping muskrats, climbing cliffs, swinging on swings, the rain, the snow, and the wind. Both Frost and Stafford write a poetry that is close to the earth and informed about natural processes.

But to Stafford, such comparisons would be at bottom superficial and misleading. He regarded Frost's personal and poetic world as a universe of missed connections, alienation, miscommunication, and regrets--a chaos marked off by artificial, insubstantial mending walls--a place of rotting wood piles and home burials. By contrast, in Stafford's world everything gets joined somehow, and nothing gets lost. Everyone and thing is a part of the same home, the same story, and indeed humans fail when they deny or violate their relationships to other people, nature, and God.

In Stafford's 1974 article "The Terror in Robert Frost," written for the centennial of Frost's birth, Stafford--who wrote exactly two short critical studies on other writers in his long career, one on Everson and this one--expresses his disquiet with Frost and his poetry. Stafford apparently adopted Lawrence Thompson's view of Frost as a cold, immoral character, as expressed in Thompson's then recently published (1970) second volume of the official biography Robert Frost: The Years of Triumph 1915-1938.¹² Stafford states in a letter that he was asked to write an article on Frost by an editor of the New York Times who requested that Stafford include some of the darker Thompson stories about Frost to spice up the article. While Stafford did not know Frost personally, he readily retold the Thompson stories.

In "The Terror in Robert Frost," after praising Frost as "America's foremost poet, its emblem poet," Stafford recounts (by way of Thompson) Frost's mocking comments about Ezra Pound--"that great intellect abloom in hair"--comments made even as Pound was championing Frost's early verse (24). Indeed, almost everything that Stafford dislikes about poetry and American letters seems to coalesce in Frost's career. "The Terror" is an ambivalent mixture of centennial celebration and Stafford's personal rejection.

¹²Stafford's letter to Don Ball dated July 14, 1991 shows that Stafford adhered to Thompson's acidic view of Frost.

"The Terror" especially exemplifies Stafford's distaste for the idea of advancing or, in Frost's case, manipulating one's career, which smacks presumably of the sin of aggressive competition. Stafford describes Frost as "currying favor with some critics [Ezra Pound, Amy Lowell] even while preparing to turn from them toward others farther along his chosen line of progress" (24). Stafford feels that Frost's "ambition" to be critically accepted (and published) is a quality no poet should indulge because of the warping effect it will have on the poetry.

In his essays Stafford argues that a poet should write "recklessly" and leave "decisions about publishing to others," the others being editors who are "friends" (YMRYL 16). One should never think about critics or even act as one's own critic when writing; judgment should always come after the fact. Stafford, indeed, had little use for critics in general throughout his career, which is possibly why he wrote so little criticism himself. When asked once what the critics had taught him about his own poetry, Stafford replied, "Zero" (Ellsworth 99).

Stafford, the pacifist poet, makes two related complaints about critics in "The Terror." First, he connects most critics with a modernist literary tradition that he feels mistakenly attempts to circumscribe the vastness of experience into a finite number of "fixed literary rules" and forms (WTAC 53). Stafford, the former

CO, saw such an attempt at control as stifling of his own and others' artistic freedom. On the other hand, he sought to broaden the definition of Eliot's "tradition." For Stafford, "Poetry today [1978] grows from a tradition that is wider than just the sequence of poems we inherit. The language all speakers use is of tradition" (WTAC 79). He regarded as slightly grotesque, for example, what he saw as the "unorthodox" Frost having to court the "orthodox" poets and critics of his day in order to make a living and gain respectability. Referring to Frost's poem "Reluctance," Stafford asserts with admiration that Frost's poetry itself makes "no bows toward tradition, nothing to link to the fashion of T. S. Eliot or Ezra Pound, nothing of the dandy, nothing 'difficult'" ("Terror" 30). Stafford ultimately argues, however, that the dark turbulence of Frost's personal life often lurks beneath the surface "calm," and that Frost's poetry, therefore, is not simple and "reassuring" but terrifying (30).

A second issue here for Stafford is implied by Frost's poetic "ambition." Stafford abhorred the idea of art as being some kind of ongoing "competition" with oneself and others; there are several aspects to this issue. One point has to do with Stafford's pacifist distrust of "authority" in general. In his essay "Making a Poem / Starting a Car on Ice," Stafford explains that

If you compose a poem you start without any authority Surely we all know that falsity

in reading a poem and judging it in terms of the author's name. We know that this is not to be used to validate the current work. A poem has to stand by itself, no matter how many prizes the writer has won. Further, we have suffered as readers when editors choose to publish by relying on the past work of an author. . . . (WTAC 62-63)

Stafford here is challenging the whole notion of T. S. Eliot's "individual talent" as either overblown, intrusive upon the creative process, or both. To Stafford everyone participates in the life of art--or should--and art rewards everyone, not only a few expert writers and readers who have earned the right through long study. Competition in art, thus, is destructive:

There is momentum and competition for names, but these understandable influences put a strain on the more important requirement that authority depends on current performance. The adventitious influences that get into the scene are always trying to corrupt the angel in us that relates to art. (WTAC 63)

Stafford, indeed, regards writing poetry as a "sacramental" process utterly divorced from a marketable product. He deplores the "commercialization" of art. One does not write poetry, he believes, in order to sell off the final product, but rather to indulge humanly with the whole of personal experience in a worthy process:

It [poetry] cannot live in the atmosphere of competition, politics, business, advertising. Successful people cannot find poems. For you must kneel down and explore for them. They seep into the world all the time and lodge in odd corners almost anywhere, in your talk, in the conversation around you. They can be terribly irresponsible. (YMRVYL 100)

In "Whose Tradition?" Stafford also quarrels with poets like Frost over the necessity of poetic form, asserting that many poets today create their own form according to context. He challenges Frost's famous dismissive definition of free verse, "like playing tennis without a net":

"Tennis with the net down!" some will charge. It is time to mention that poetry is not tennis, that there are games so important that nothing less than everything in your experience is sufficient to bring along for your involvement. (WTAC 77)

Stafford, of course, would also disagree with the suggestion of competition implied by Frost's tennis analogy.

A related Stafford notion that he associates with competition involves the virtue, even the necessity, of creative "failure." Stafford repeatedly admonishes poets who are afraid to write for fear of some "high standard," whether self-imposed or external; Stafford himself ignores external pressure:

I must be willing to fail. If I am to keep on writing, I cannot bother to insist on high standards. I must get into action and not let anything stop me, or even slow me much. By "standards" I do not mean "correctness"--spelling, punctuation, and so on I am thinking about such matters as social significance, positive value, consistency, etc. I resolutely disregard these. (WTAC 63)

For Stafford a poet must write his "bad poems" along with the good, participation in art being ultimately as important as achievement--or maybe the way to achievement.

Surprisingly, "The Terror in Robert Frost" actually illustrates important areas of agreement between Stafford

and Frost, but the piece is written so obliquely at times, even ironically (a tone that Stafford, the anti-Modernist, usually avoids), that it is difficult to know the extent of those areas. Stafford certainly feels in tune with the "understated" effect in Frost of using "country things" to suggest "symbolic meanings" (27). Frost's belief that poetry should not be studied but enjoyed--"You go to school to learn to read"--is also a favorite idea of Stafford's. Both men in fact did non-traditional, even outrageous things in the classroom. Stafford relates, disapprovingly, some now famous (and humorous) Thompson stories about how Frost hated to grade students:

He tried tagging students with their grades on the first day in class, and then allowing them to come in to persuade him if they could, to change the grade. He asked if students wanted papers returned, and if they hesitated he swept the papers into the wastebasket. When forced to give a final exam at the University of Michigan, Frost simply asked his students to write down what they had got from the course. Later, he reported to a friend that one student said he hadn't got a damned thing out of the course and that the student had received a B. Asked why not an A, Frost said the student misspelled "damned." (28)

While Stafford rejects Frost's teaching idiosyncracies as disrespectful, Stafford himself happily departed from traditional pedagogy. This divergence, not surprisingly, coincides with his unique views about writing. Stafford describes his creative writing class in his essay "A Priest

of the Imagination,"¹³ explaining that he feels the traditional teacher-as-evaluator is a paralyzing distraction to students trying to participate freely in art. Stafford instead prefers an atmosphere where he and his students are "artists together" free of worry about living up to certain standards of expectation:

Consider for a minute. Suppose I feel the responsibility to meet certain standards. Think of it seriously: the student becomes an element in a situation that may strain our encounter. A standard may be scary to the student; it will be presented so. But an increment in one's own life? That is easy. And my job is with increments, entirely so. The students should not worry about standards. I won't. And I will never try to make the student either complacent or panicked about external obligation. Never. That kind of measuring is not what art, what writing is about.

Bosses may do what they will, later. Administrators may have to be accountable in their way. My way to be accountable is related directly, simply, honestly, nonthreateningly (and non-praisingly) to my individual student. For that student, my role is to be a priest of the imagination. We share encounters, and my job is to try that no soul be lost, ever. (94)

Clearly what Stafford rejects concerning Frost is not his poetry, but the man himself whom he reads into it. The Frost Lawrance Thompson chronicles is a cruel father, husband, and friend. In addition to Frost's career machinations and behind-the-back insults of apparent friends, Stafford refers to ugly incidents from Thompson's biography, like the time Lesley Frost overheard her father

¹³An allusion no doubt to a "priest of the eternal imagination," Stephen Dedalus's phrase from Joyce's Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man

threaten her mother with a revolver: "'Take your choice. Before morning, one of us will be dead'" (24). Stafford relates another Thompson story which describes Frost taking advantage of Raymond Holden, a young poet and admirer. Frost, who was already planning to move, sold part of his farm in Franconia, New Hampshire to Holden who wanted to live near his favorite poet. Stafford accurately summarizes the Thompson story: "Holden . . . agreed to Frost's stipulation that if the Frost's wished to move Holden would buy the remainder of the farm for another 2,500. Within a year Frost had collected Holden's money and used it to buy a place in Massachussets" (30).

Stafford seems to relate Frost's alleged immorality and instability to his lack of faith in some transcendent order: "Frost's poems reflect a disquieted, anxious being in a world without boundaries" ("Terror" 30). Stafford insists that Frost presents a terrible model for young people:

For one thing, [Frost's] vision is not a sustained, reassuring vision for the young. He seems as frightened as Pascal by 'the awful silence of those infinite spaces'--and without Pascal's faith. (30)

Stafford does not explain why Frost should be a model of morality, but we might speculate. For one thing, both Frost and Stafford held the post of Poetry Consultant to the Library of Congress (Frost was the first so named). Clearly it annoyed Stafford that someone who was apparently as

callous as Frost to his students and others should have held a position of political leadership, however symbolic.

In recent years Thompson's dark portrait of Frost has lost some of its credibility. Kenneth Pritchard, for one, challenges Thompson's grim portrait, claiming that Frost often told exaggerated stories about himself for effect and that Thompson had no sense of humor. While Pritchard does not excuse Frost's acerbic manner, he does suggest that Frost was not a monster and had many friends. Nancy Vogel in Robert Frost, Teacher (1974) makes a similar point when she lists several Frost students who were inspired by what he liked to call his "informal teaching" and who went on to teach successfully themselves (51). In contrast to Lawrence Thompson's perspective, Vogel describes Frost as a serious teacher, indeed as an "educational philosopher" who was disturbed by the rigidity of academic institutions and who consistently pursued freedom for himself and his students (64).

In a letter to this writer, Stafford reiterates his admiration for Frost the poet and his rejection of Frost the man. Referring to the poetry, Stafford states: "I admire Frost's poems, and I give allegiance to his sense of how the language goes, just the limberness of his constructions, his readiness to flow with the genius of speech."¹⁴ On the

¹⁴Letter to the author, dated July 14, 1991

other hand, Stafford describes several unfavorable Frost-related stories from his own stint as Poetry Consultant in 1971. Apparently Leslie Frost Ballantine, Frost's daughter, showed up one day at the Library of Congress, and Stafford "kept her going with all kinds of questions."

For instance I asked if she had read the Thompson book, and she denied that she had. Then, typically, she demonstrated that she really had looked at it, for she said something like, "Anyway, my father didn't treat my mother like that." But again she reversed herself, saying, "Well, he really was paranoid." "Could you give me an example?" I asked. And she said, "Oh, once when he had been out with some writers he came home where my mother was ironing and said, 'So and so is an enemy.' My mother said, 'You don't know that. Why do you say that?' And he said, 'Well, he came into the room and saw me and then turned to talk with someone else.'"

Stafford includes a few other second-hand Frost stories in his letter including one that comes out of a lunch-line conversation Stafford had with Library of Congress employee Bob Land. Land asked Stafford if he was surprised by the revelations in the first volume of the Thompson biography. Stafford said that he was, and Land

happened to glimpse Roy Basler (historian and in charge of a section of the Library): "Roy, you were here when Frost was here; was he really as bad as Thompson says?" And Roy, usually a most correct speaker, said, "Sure. Even then we all knew he was a son of a bitch."

Stafford states in this same letter that while he "grew up knowing [Frost's] poetry pretty well," he does not feel any undue influence in his own work. Stafford does recognize, however, one specific connection: "my first book,

West of Your City [1960], is like a challenge to Frost's first . . . North of Boston. I wanted my book to suggest a Western readiness to be more far out (in an older sense of that term) than most poetry collections." This casual dismissal of Frost as an influence contrasts with Stafford's general interest in him. Stafford seems to delight in joining in the post-Thompson puncturing of Frost's image of the great gray poet. Certainly Frost made a large target; when Stafford was beginning his own serious writing as a young man at the University of Kansas in the early 1930s, Frost was ascendant as the greatest living American poet, casting a long shadow over any young writer.

Another area of commonality between the two poets that Stafford mentions concerns Frost's interest in the interplay of sound and meaning. In "The Terror" Stafford approvingly paraphrases Frost's idea about how in poetry "the sense of a sentence influences the sound so much that fixed schemes of analyzing verse are very inadequate" (30). Stafford quotes Frost from a 1914 letter to Robert Bridges:

The living part of a poem is the intonation entangled somehow in the syntax idiom and meaning of a sentence. It is only there for those who have heard it previously in conversation. It is not for us in any Greek or Latin poem because our ears have not been filled with the tones of Greek or Roman talk. It is the most volatile and at the same time important part of poetry. . . . (30)

More than once in Stafford's essays, he notes this conversational virtue in Frost: "Robert Frost said, 'I'll say you a poem'" (YMRYL 117).

Stafford does not usually start, of course, with a foundation of meter and rhyme, as Frost does, though often the skeleton of traditional form is present. Indeed, Stafford feels that end rhyme, especially, puts an usually unwarranted emphasis on the rhymed words (Stafford does occasionally use end rhyme in his early work). In his essay "Writing the Australian Crawl," Stafford describes his sense of employing sound in composition:

. . . for the writer (prose or poetry) all words rhyme, sort of; that is, all sounded words are more like each other than any word is like silence. You start from an assumption of relation, and your experience with the language is a continuous experience with more or less similar sounds. You are always modulating along in sound. The writer and the speaker always live in one big chime. (26)

Stafford likes to talk about how sound helps nudge him along when he writes, as he explains in "Where 'Yellow Cars' Comes From":

I live in one great bell of sound when doing a poem; and I like how the syllables do-si-do along. I am not after rhyme--so limited, so mechanical. No, I want all the syllables to be there like a school of fish, flashing, relating to other syllables in other words (even words not in the poem, of course), fluently carrying the reader by subliminal felicities all the way to the limber last line. (44)

Sound play in the form of alliteration, sight rhyme, near rhyme, and internal rhyme, though prevalent throughout Stafford's poetry, is particularly prominent in some of his early poems. "Circle of Breath" from West of Your City (1960), for example, has some end rhyme and three four-line

stanzas, but is written for the most part in free verse. Its internal sound patterns give "Circle of Breath" an almost formal coherence that recalls Frost. It is instructive to compare the patterns in Stafford's poem to the use of sound in a Frost poem like "Desert Places." Stafford seems to be working with sound in a similar fashion. "Circle of Breath" is autobiographical.

The night my father died the moon shone on the snow.
I drove in from the west; mother was at the door.
All the light in the room extended like a shadow.
Truant from knowing, I stood where the great dark fell.

The sibilant "s's" of "shone," "snow," and "shadow" and the hard "d's" of "died," "drove," "door," and "dark" come fast, competing for the setting. The two sounds also combine in words like "shadow" and "stood." "Moon" and "mother" also pair off in sound as do "father" and "fell." All the details and the pattern they form, in fact, connect in the present dramatic moment. The idea of falling in the first stanza--"fell--is rhymed by "tell" and also connects or is "extended like a shadow" backwards and forwards to the fallen "father," the falling "snow," and the "great dark" and thus to being "truant from knowing," to being "in the dark" about death.

The speaker's stance by his car triggers a memory of father and son.

There was a time before, something we used to tell--
how we parked the car in a storm
and walked into a field
to know how it was to be cut off,
out in the dark alone.

My father and I stood together
while the storm went by.

"W" sounds dominate the stanza--"was," "we," "walked," "while," "went"--indicating, perhaps, the significance of both first person plural and the past tense while reminding us, possibly, of the symbolic "west" of the first stanza. "To know how" also contains some w's--buried ones--and contrasts with the idea of "truant from knowing" in the first stanza. "Know" also, of course, echoes the unpronounced snow of the "storm." In addition, the last line of the second stanza parallels the structure of the last line of the first stanza--as does the memory.

The third stanza fuses the memory scene and the occasion for the speaker's present memory in a circle of breaths, a "windmill" of "w," "s," and "c" sounds.

A windmill was there in the field
giving its little cry
while we stood calm in ourselves,
knowing we could go home.
But I stood on the skull of the world
the night he died, and knew
that I leased a place to live
with my white breath.

The hard "c" sounds of the third stanza of "cry," "calm," and "could" reach back for "car" and "cut off" in the second, and combine hard "k" and sibilant "s" in the title word "circle" and in the dramatic metaphor of the earth, "the skull of the world"--"skull" itself having once been a kind of circle of breath (the moon is similarly like a lifeless skull). The mournful "cry" of the helplessly

revolving windmill in the storm is the cathartic symbol for how brutally death victimizes and takes away from the living and with what helpless memories it leaves. With catharsis comes a truer "knowing": "Truant no more, I stepped forward and learned his death."

The sound patterns in "Circle of Breath" work to make whole a shattered moment. Writing the poem itself was surely for Stafford an important means to understanding. The snowy situation and the lonely field made more lonely by death bring to mind a poem like Frost's "Desert Places."

"Desert Places" is also knitted together with sound. In the first stanza, the alliterative "f's" and "s's" fall as fast as snowflakes.

Snow falling and night falling fast, oh, fast
In a field I looked into going past,
And the ground almost covered smooth in snow,
But a few weeds and stubble showing last.

The woods around it have it--it is theirs.
All animals are smothered in their lairs.
I am too absent-spirited to count;
The loneliness includes me unawares.

The speaker seems to be in a vehicle, perhaps a car, cut off from the actual effects of the storm. The second stanza furthers the "s" sounds oddly through plurality--"woods," (a cousin of "weeds" in the first stanza), "theirs," "animals," "lairs"--and through the singular verb form "includes" and the adverb "unawares" both of which relate to the subject noun "loneliness." This blizzard of "s's," plus "smothered" and "absent-spirited," refer back to the title itself which

combines the singular noun-adjective "desert" with the plural "places." The intriguing pronoun "it" refers to the noun "field" or snow or to some inexpressible something (or nothing), or to any number of nouns in the first stanza. The speaker, one might argue, feels ambivalence about his own connection to the rest of the world. Is he, for example, apart from and superior to Nature, a singular phenomenon, or (more realistically) simply another "smothered" animal, one of a herd, huddling in his own lair? The speaker cannot "count" or be counted because of this duality of possibilities.

In the third stanza of "Desert Places," "l" words dominate in "lonely," "loneliness," "Will," "less," and "blanker"--continuing from "lairs" and "loneliness" from the second stanza. This accumulation of "l's" lulls and freezes the speaker in an increasing sense of abstraction and ennui.

And lonely as it is that loneliness
Will be more lonely ere it will be less--
A blanker whiteness of benighted snow
With no expression, nothing to express.

The intriguing word "benighted" reverberates between the words "night," and the dark night of ignorance, and even "knighthood," mocking perhaps the high codes of human behavior when set against alien natural forces.

The "s" sounds of the opening lines in "scare," "spaces," "stars," and "is" repeat in the fourth stanza.

They cannot scare me with their empty spaces
Between stars--on stars where no human race is.

The "s" sounds contribute to a more informal tone than the third stanza's elegant and more muted double "s" words--"loneliness," "less," "whiteness," "expression," and "express." The "m" sounds of the stanza--"me," "empty," "much," "myself," and "my"--close the poem with the focus on the personal and informal "I" of the speaker. The speaker's "I" seems at odds somehow with the other ambiguous pronouns of the poem, the various "theirs" and "its."

In Stafford's "Circle of Breath" and Frost's "Desert Places," one gets the sense that the elaborate internal sound patterns, as they emerged, must have helped each poet discover new words and ideas. In "Desert Places," for example, Frost appears to be splitting the last word of the first line of each stanza into two sounds in the second line. Thus, "fast," splits into the words "field" and "past" in the second line; "theirs" becomes "their lairs"; "loneliness" divides into "lonely" and "less"; and "spaces" breaks off into "stars" and "race is." This splitting reinforces the general sense of the speaker's separateness and emotional distance from the natural world while, paradoxically, being just another animal in it. In a darkly playful way Frost buries the "pathetic fallacy" in snow. There are great gaps and deserts in the world and out of it, just as there are terrifying spaces within people and between them. But what corresponds in this analogy is the

void--"no expression, nothing to express"--and not necessarily human meaning.

Stafford, by contrast, is working in "Circle of Breath" towards cohesion and synthesis. His speaker, while separated from his father by death, is rejoined by the memory of their close relationship, of their once standing together in a field until a storm passed. Just as this memory in the third stanza impinges on the present time of the poem, the speaker synthesizes and absorbs the life and death of the father. Interestingly, the truth about life here holds a kind of Frostian terror: one "leases" life, the sibilant steam; the "circle of breath" that one sees in the cold is at bottom a "skull."

Stafford's ambivalence towards Frost is best demonstrated by comparing each poet's most famous poem. Stafford's "Traveling Through the Dark," his most anthologized poem, is often compared to Frost's familiar standard "Stopping By Woods on a Snowy Evening." In both poems a local traveler in the midst of some unspecified evening journey stops and contemplates Nature and human obligation. In "Stopping" Frost's speaker sits in what is apparently a horse-drawn cart or sleigh and considers the contrast between his own impractical contemplation of nature, of watching the "woods fill up with snow" (like watching the grass grow) and the absentee owner of the woods.

Whose woods these are I think I know.
His house is in the village though;
He will not see me stopping here
To watch his woods fill up with snow.

By comparison, Stafford's speaker in "Traveling" (1962) stops his car or truck, not to contemplate Nature, but because of a life-or-death emergency. Exactly whose life or whose death, though, becomes the issue:

Traveling through the dark I found a deer
dead on the edge of the Wilson River road.
It is usually best to roll them into the canyon:
that road is narrow; to swerve might make more dead.

The speaker, like Frost's speaker who is also apparently a local, knows the custom on "that road" and dutifully pulls up beyond the accident to perform the required removal (presumably another vehicle has killed the deer).

By glow of the tail-light I stumbled back of the car
and stood by the heap, a doe, a recent killing;
she had stiffened already, almost cold.
I dragged her off; she was large in the belly.

Hurrying to remove the carcass but emotionally uninvolved at this point, the speaker suddenly realizes that his simple action has complex ethical ramifications.

My fingers touching her side brought me the reason--
her side was warm; her fawn lay there waiting,
alive, still, never to be born.
Beside that mountain road I hesitated.

In both poems the speakers' stopping or hesitation is dangerously outside of custom. In Frost's "Stopping" the speaker's "little horse" "gives his harness bells a shake" to signal an instinctive objection to standing still in the snow. Similarly in Stafford's "Traveling," the speaker's

hesitation risks getting him hit by another vehicle (like a deer in headlights) on the narrow road.

The car aimed ahead its lowered parking lights;
under the hood purred the steady engine.
I stood in the glare of the warm exhaust turning red;
around our group I could hear the wilderness listen.

In both poems local custom and duty to others prompts action. Frost's speaker, we surmise, will soon leave his moment of contemplation "to keep" his promises and complete his journey while Stafford's speaker considers his own complicity in the death of the unborn fawn but acts in spite of it to prevent human death.

I thought hard for us all--my only swerving--, then pushed her over the edge into the river.
In his uncollected poem "Stopping By Frost,"

Stafford, uncharacteristically, parodies Frost's famous poem. Stafford's poem is, like "The Terror In Robert Frost," an ambivalent tribute as well.

Whose lines these were I thought I knew.
His claims, though, Lawrence Thompson blew
so high our inner weather changed:
I watch my bookshelf fill with rue.

My little children think it strange
to see the Frost-line rearranged.
They think there must be some mistake.
And they deserve in youth to range--

This book is lovely, deep and dark:
so they shall have its "downy flake"
and poems to love before they wake,
and poems to love before they wake.

If nothing else, "Stopping By Frost" demonstrates Stafford's familiarity with Frost's work and rhythms. "Inner weather" and "rue" apparently allude to Frost's famous "Tree at My Window" and "Dust of Snow." Significantly, both of these

well-known poems--as Stafford might have pointed out as he did in "The Terror"--are probably sentimental favorites of people who do not normally read poetry, the same people, in other words, who would prefer a sentimental view of Frost himself. In addition, the second stanza of "Stopping By Frost" may also allude to Frost's "Range-Finding"; appropriately in this context, "Range-Finding" is a poem about trying to find the range to hit the mark. Stafford's poem seems to say that young people will "wake" up to the reality of Frost's true character--will hit the mark--and therefore fall out of "love" with his poetry.

Stafford's parody makes some clever moves combining Frost the man with Frost the artist. The "Frost-line," for example plays on the comfortably recognizable Frost line of verse, the pre-Thompson personal and political "line on" Frost, and Frost as a kind of predictable, chilled force of nature like the snow line. In the last stanza Stafford "rearranges" the wording of the "Frost-line" into "This book is lovely, deep and dark." "This book" presumably is an early book or a selection of Frost's poetry. The Thompson biography then, because of its "dark" portrayal of Frost, has darkened and changed the speaker's--Stafford's--reading of the Frost poems. Such a biographical reading of a poet's poetry is actually counter to Stafford's stated stance on the assumed distance between the human and the artist, and

the artist and the art, but is perfectly in keeping with Stafford's sense of right and wrong and Robert Frost.

While Stafford's "Traveling Through the Dark" does parallel Frost's "Stopping By Woods on a Snowy Evening," a more apt Frost comparison might be with his poem "Design." Stafford's opening line in "Traveling"--"Traveling through the dark I found a deer"--recalls Frost's opening in "Design"--"I found a dimpled spider, fat and white." In both poems a human observer comes upon a scene of "death and blight" in nature. Whether by accident or design, Frost's moth has fatally collided with a spider's web. Similarly, Stafford's pregnant doe has presumably been struck by a vehicle. Each poet sets up a tableau composed of human observer and creatures which are both living and dead. In each poem the first person speaker wonders about the mystery of the drama witnessed. Here, however, the comparison ends. In "Design," the design of nature and the human portion in it seems to resist human logic and questions.

The coincidence in "Design" of the flower and the spider being white, the symbolic color of innocence, defies the human conceptions of beauty and reason and logically suggests in microcosm a cosmic chaos--or worse, a malevolent pattern alien to human values. By contrast, Stafford's speaker in "Traveling"--perhaps because he is essentially Stafford himself and a Christian--assumes from the beginning that though the mysteries of death and life-in-death in the

body of the doe and unborn fawn will remain essentially impenetrable, his own involvement with and responsibility towards nature and people makes sense. Stafford's speaker does not simply wonder, like Frost's speaker, at the horror that nature has wrought, he wonders at the horror that he himself produces as he inexorably chooses to push the doe "over the edge into the river."

Just as Stafford's belief in a universal design contrasts with Frost's in these poems, so too does Stafford disagree with Frost's sense of artistic design. In Stafford's "The Terror In Robert Frost," he challenges the usual reading of Frost's famous definition that a poem is "a momentary stay against confusion," pointing out that "one can emphasize either the 'stay against confusion,' or the 'momentary'" (28. One might read Frost's "Design," for example, as a poem that artistically arrests or clarifies the confusion of the natural world but does not find any reasonable or comforting hint of God in it. Given this reading, art becomes a courageous but futile attempt to create meaningful order where none exists. Frost's poetry, therefore, must strive for form itself (in Stafford's interpretation of it); art must take God's place.

Politics and Heroism

Thompson's scathing official biography confirmed Stafford's already half-formed judgment about the famous poet: that Frost had manufactured a dangerous and in some

ways false image of himself for the public. Besides the previously mentioned character flaws--a jealous and ambitious nature, paranoia, and a delight in spreading malicious gossip--the Frost that Thompson shows was conservative politically which would have been abhorrent to Stafford. Thompson's Frost and his wife Elinor were both harsh critics of Roosevelt and the New Deal and especially of unions and leftist movements (448). Thompson relates that while Frost was at Harvard as a visiting professor in 1930, Frost was inspired to write his famous "Provide, Provide," describing it as a "bitterly sarcastic poem" prompted by Frost's disgust at a strike by charwomen apparently instigated by "leftist" professors: "The witch that came (the withered hag) / To wash the steps with pail and rag / Was once the beauty Abishag . . ." (437). Frost, according to Thompson's interpretation, felt the professors' interest in these common women to be deluded and quixotic. Thompson observes that Frost felt a poet should not be a reformer (437).

Thompson's account of Frost in 1917 describes him at forty threatening to enlist in order to impress Elinor (she was not impressed) (108). Frost's bravado (he spent one afternoon, according to Thompson, marching with the volunteers on the Amherst commons) would also have not endeared him to Stafford the pacifist (108). Actually, contrary to Stafford's view of him, Frost mostly stayed out

of politics. He became an isolationist in the 1930s, not from opposing war but from a desire (like the Buchanan populism of the 1990s) to see America separate herself from European troubles and the burden of oppressed peoples. This separatist attitude doubtlessly would also have rankled Stafford who as a young man was so involved in racial politics and pacifism. Stafford mentions his "sympathy," for example, for the Fellowship of Reconciliation, a international Christian pacifist organization ("William" 333). The FOR¹⁵ (which Stafford at some point apparently joined) was especially active on American college campuses, sponsoring events like a "Day of National Humiliation" marking October 16, 1940, the first day of draft registration (Eller 18-19), and putting out publications like the Pacifist Handbook (23).

Yet even before Thompson's biography, Stafford claims he disliked Frost's politics. In response to my pointing out that many writers and friends of Frost have come to his defense, Stafford explains that

I don't know enough about Frost and Pritchard to get much engaged with Pritchard's denial that Frost deserved such a bad press. But I have a few perhaps relevant remarks. For one thing, before Thompson, before any turning against Frost, I never did admire his cracker barrel politics; I abhor the kind of Americanism astride the world that he stood for. His heroics never appealed to me.

¹⁵Reinhold Niebuhr resigned as the FOR chair in 1934 because he felt that violence was justified against the growing fascist threat.

It is difficult to know just where Stafford gets this image of Frost the "heroic" imperialist. Stanley Burnshaw, a personal friend of Frost's, tells us that even after Pearl Harbor, Frost refused his best friend Louis Untermeyer's request that he compose a statement against fascism for the Office of War Information. Instead of the statement, Frost sent Untermeyer a letter poem:

I'd rather there had been no war at all
Than have you cross with me because of it . . .
The army wouldn't have me at the front,
And hero at the rear I will not be . . .
(Burnshaw 72)

Frost's attitude about American non-involvement, from Untermeyer and Burnshaw's account, continued through the 1950s.

Stafford's irritation with Frost's politics must have been focussed on Frost's last years, his role as Poetry Consultant to the Library of Congress, and his involvement with the then Senator and soon-to-be-President John Kennedy. Frost caused a stir in 1958 by blithely predicting that Kennedy, his fellow New Englander, would become the next president (Thompson 301). Stafford seems to join the old poet and the youthful ex-war hero together in his mind. Stafford disliked the extreme patriotism that Kennedy projected, criticizing as romantic, dangerous, and "ridiculous" for example, Kennedy's statement during the Berlin Crisis to the effect that "'any place can be defended if it's defended by brave men'" (Ellsworth 95).

Beginning with his reading at Kennedy's Inauguration, Frost became an artistic emissary for the administration. This role ended abruptly after Frost's unfortunate, unauthorized conversation with Khrushchev. Stafford relates the misadventure in biting terms:

And maybe you know the account Udall gave about when he was Secretary of the Interior in the Kennedy cabinet: Frost horned in on a meeting with Khrushchev and grabbed some headlines. When Udall got back from that trip to Russia (Udall himself told me this) he made the required report-in call to the White House and President Kennedy's first words were, "Why did you let him talk to Khrushchev?" And from that day Kennedy never spoke to or communicated with Frost, even when Frost was dying and other leaders were sending him get-well messages.¹⁶

Frost was extravagantly grateful to Kennedy for the invitation to visit Moscow with Udall on a cultural exchange and apparently was also filled with enthusiasm for Khrushchev (Poetry and Prose 445-446). Frost got sick in Russia, and Khrushchev visited him in the hospital where apparently Frost confronted him about international tensions. Later at a literary evening, Frost read "Mending Wall" which the Russians received--apparently somewhat garbled in translation--to be a rebuke directed towards their sponsorship of the newly erected Berlin Wall (Gerber 28-29). Frost was surprised and chagrined at the major embarrassment he had caused the President (Poetry and Prose 446).

¹⁶From a letter to Don Ball, dated July 14, 1991

Although Stafford claims no special awareness of Frost's influence in his poetry, Stafford did, nevertheless, manage to research him thoroughly. In addition to talking with employees and at least one politician at the Library of Congress about Frost, Stafford also quizzed a noted American literature scholar from Brown University "at length" (Stafford could not recall his name) concerning Frost, and the scholar shared Thompson's attitude.

This professor said that early on Frost began to turn over materials to Thompson, and then by the time the two realized they didn't like each other Frost's lust for having a biography kept him from breaking with Thompson. But according to this professor Frost disliked Thompson so much that once Frost, even when he was an old man, knocked his biographer down.¹⁷

Thompson's portrait of Frost reveals him as a man of literally murderous rage who was often on the edge of violence even with his friends. In his Index for Days of Triumph Thompson lists such flattering topics for cross-referencing as "Anti-Intellectualism," "Atheism," "Brute," "Cowardice," "Depression," "Enemies," "Insanity," "Jealousy," "Murderer," "Rage," "Poetic Retaliations," "Revenge," "Self-Centeredness," and "Vindictive" (716-731). Thompson makes the outrageous claim at one point that "Murder, and even the desire to murder for justice rather than for mercy, never stayed out of Frost's consciousness too long" (439). According to Thompson, Frost thought of

¹⁷Letter to Don Ball, July 14, 1991

killing any number of obscure and prominent people for revenge during his lifetime, including Ezra Pound while Frost was in England (440). Stanley Burnshaw counters this argument, asserting that Thompson brought out the worst kind of anger in Frost because Frost felt that his biographer neither liked him nor understood his poetry--and Frost only kept him as his official biographer out of loyalty.

Burnshaw, who like others, believed that much of Frost's "rage" too was hyperbole, further documents several of Frost's oldest friends' accounts disputing Thompson's version of a violent Frost. Burnshaw also, by the way, points out the little-known, successful political effort by Frost to arrange for Ezra Pound's release from prison in Italy. Archibald MacLeish--whom Thompson credits for this humane effort--in fact assigns most of the credit to Frost (95).

Stafford begins his Writing the Australian Crawl in 1977 with a congenial reference to Frost:

Poetry is the kind of thing you have to see from the corner of your eye. You can be too well prepared for poetry. A conscientious interest in it is worse than no interest at all, as I believe Frost used to say. It's like a very faint star. If you look straight at it you can't see it, but if you look a little to one side it is there.
(3)

Stafford, indeed, seemed to like the idea of Frost's star twinkling in his heavens as long as it did not shine too brightly. In an interview with Peter Ellsworth, Stafford moves smoothly from JFK in Berlin, to Hemingway the war

romantic, to the idea that "The heroic stance is so quaint in the big picture" (96). From this thought about heroics, Stafford segues into his dissatisfaction with "forensic involvements" and "contention" in poetry which, predictably, reminds him of Frost's "heroic" politics: "it just seems to me counter productive to enter into the intricacies of intellectual discovery on a horse" (96).

In "Hero" from Someday, Maybe (1973), we get a perspective on the slain President Kennedy that is consistent with Stafford's mistrust of mainstream cultural history and its veneration of the fallen warrior:

What if he came back, astounded
to find his name so honored, schools
named after him, a flame at his tomb,
his careless words cherished? How could
he ever face the people again, knowing
all he would know in that great clarity
of the other side? (His eyes flare into
the eyes of his wife. He searches his brothers'
drawn faces turned toward him suddenly still.)

Stafford notices the contrast between the sacred solemnity of Kennedy's tomb at Arlington (and the ritual yearly gathering of the Kennedys there) and the vital, all too human young leader. The legends of PT 109 and Camelot must be preserved; America needs its heroes.

No. Better abandoned in the ground,
recklessly cast back into the trash of
our atoms, all once loved let languish:
a lost civilization loses by particulars,
faith eroded by faithlessly treating
its servants. (Remember the slipping
progress the hearse made?--dwindling importantly
where faces could never really turn round?)

The memory of Kennedy, like a young Aeneas ("I sing of arms and the man"), the legendary founder of Rome, must be preserved as a whole "relic" for the good of the American Empire.

Our words apologize for such chill,
engulfing perspectives. We look deep into
the branded time helplessly and then come
chattering back for assurance to shore up
our relics: *Arma virumque cano*. Such effort
it takes to build the high walls of Rome. (9)

One is reminded of Wilfred Owen's ironic "*Dulce et Decorum Est*"--"it is sweet and honorable to die for one's country"--from Horace, as applied to the slaughtered "heroes" of World War I.

"It is time for all the heroes to go home," says Stafford in "Allegiances, "if they have any: / time for all of us common ones / to locate ourselves by the real things / we live by." Stafford's true heroes are not warriors like Kennedy, but rather thinkers, spiritual leaders, and peacemakers--like Pascal, or Dag Hammarskjold, or George from Down in My Heart, or, poignantly, Stafford's father:

Listening

My father could hear a little animal step,
or a moth in the dark against the screen,
and every far sound called the listening out
into places where the rest of us had never been.

More spoke to him from the soft wild night
than came to our porch for us on the wind;
we would watch him look up and his face go keen
till the walls of the world flared, widened.

My father heard so much that we still stand
inviting the quiet by turning the face,
waiting for a time when something in the night
will touch us too from that other place. (WOYC 33)

CHAPTER 5

THE RIVER OF HISTORY

Pacifism and Quakerism form the bedrock of Stafford's poetry. They constitute the theme and the method that Stafford invariably returns to throughout his poetic career. Furthermore, these forces converge in nature and in Stafford's unique conception of history. Stafford rejects the romantic version of history--of patriotic myths filled with entertaining conflicts between "good" and "evil," "villains" and "heroes." He is, however, constantly aware of the historical, actually mentioning the word "history" repeatedly, while challenging its martial, heroic emphasis.

Stafford understood history to be a dynamic, unfolding story that people form to make sense of their own importance; of course, people form many stories. To Stafford history moves like a river, and history explains not only how we have arrived, but in what direction we are heading. Like Michel Foucault, Stafford is, at bottom, more interested in "the history of the present" than of the past (Gutting 10). Beyond the question even of the history of the present, Stafford feels that the poet must discover the unfolding future. Through an extreme receptivity to the

present, the poet seeks to "find out what the world is trying to be." While Stafford stops short of claiming that he, as a poet, should lead the greater culture into that future, he consistently reminds us in his treatment of history that the often violent world he sees has always had different, less contentious possibilities.

In this idea about alternative historical possibilities, Stafford agrees with Foucault who himself questions the notion that the "intolerable" conditions, institutions, and practices of today have been somehow inevitably arrived at. Gutting points out that "Foucault's histories aim to remove this air of necessity by showing that the past ordered things quite differently" (10). Foucault shows us that institutions like psychiatric hospitals and prisons were not at all the solutions of previous eras to the problems of treating the insane and the criminal--which are themselves modern categories.

The difficulty for Stafford as a pacifist is that peaceful alternatives to war and conflict, when they have occurred in the past, have usually passed unnoticed. Since the absence of conflict typically has little dramatic impact--i.e., no memorable battles or explosions--the "plot" of such history provides flat, unexciting reading. This lack of conflict, this peace, as in Stafford's poem "At the Un-National Canadian border," produces few monuments or marks in the mainstream histories. There are some notable

modern exceptions to this problem of historical visibility, but even these are often misread. The 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis, for example, is rightly recognized as a moment of supreme nuclear peril barely averted. Still, even here the prevailing historical "story" describes the American hero Kennedy and the Soviet villain Khrushchev engaged in a staring contest with Khrushchev blinking first and backing down, and not as a story of successful and lucky diplomacy. Kennedy, of course, had to threaten nuclear Armageddon to get peace. Another "triumph" in the history of peace--Carter's Camp David Peace Accords--surely one of the most significant and far-reaching peace agreements in the twentieth century--has all but been ignored by most historians. This has happened even while Camp David arguably has laid the foundation for a general peace in the volatile and vitally important Middle East.

The Hero in History

We get an early example of Stafford's irreverent view of history in his previously unpublished "At the Custer Monument" (1953). We might picture Stafford, who is always interested in the markers we leave behind, looking down from "Custer's Hill" at the pattern of Custer's dead. To Stafford's speaker, the site of Custer's infamous massacre is subdued by nature's silence:

They buried the soldiers where they fell;
their markers go sudden and white.
In the valley of the Little Big Horn
history explodes into quiet.

Although Hollywood up until this time had been portraying Custer as a martyred hero--as Errol Flynn leading heroic calvary charges in They Died with Their Boots On (1941)--Stafford understood that the real Custer died as a pawn to the politicians and miners who wanted the gold in the Black Hills. The Black Hills, of course, was sacred Indian land, promised to the Sioux in perpetuity by the U. S. government:

"While the grass grows the land is yours."
But gold brought in the miners,
and Custer was pushed toward Crazy Horse,
to a meeting this grass remembers.

Instead of heroically leading the way, in other words, Custer was actually "pushed" from behind to attack. Since no one in Custer's immediate command survived, white historians were reluctant for years to credit Indian accounts which undercut the growing Custer myth (Barnett 344-345). Stafford describes how soldiers from Major Reno and Captain Benteen's command, fought desperately to survive. Custer was, by this point in the battle, already dead (Barnett 293-300).

The wounded cried "Water!" all afternoon.
Spilling down the hillside
go scattered markers of volunteers
who tried for the river that night.

These genuinely heroic "volunteers" remain mostly nameless to history. Furthermore, their heroism is displayed within the context of a morally indefensible military campaign. The ultimate hero and victor of the battle is not Custer, of course, so oblivious to his own danger, but Sitting Bull's

lieutenant, Crazy Horse. Crazy Horse also, becomes the ultimate loser together with the other Plains Indians who are soon hunted down and either killed or moved to reservations in Oklahoma (Barnett 323-324).

Where Crazy Horse rode like a flung war bonnet
fluttering at the white man,
truing through the grass a low wind cuts
through the valley of the Little Big Horn.
(Roving 35)

The truth of the battle, from Stafford's perspective, relates more to Crazy Horse than to Custer. The two hundred and sixty-three Seventh Cavalrymen who died in the battle all have their names engraved on the Custer Monument; no Native Americans are so honored (Barnett 383). Robert Bly relates that Stafford had an even more personal interest in the Native American viewpoint: Stafford's grandmother, it was said was "part Crowfoot" (ix-x).

"At the Custer Monument" is a pacifist poem mostly because of what it does not do rather than what it denounces. Custer himself is not even in evidence, certainly not as portrayed by the film industry or by the dramatic barroom paintings so popular at the end of the century, which typically placed him in buckskins and golden curls fighting erect at the center of his few remaining troopers (Barnett 401). Native American and Federal eyewitness accounts after the battle actually inform us that Custer's long locks had been cut short prior to the battle

and that he was among the first to die after the retreat to "Custer's Hill" (401).

Louise Barnett theorizes in Touched by Fire: The Life, Death, and Mythic Afterlife of George Armstrong Custer that the main reason white Americans have been obsessed with Custer's decisions and his fate is simple racism: white people just could not believe that Indians could beat such a formidable white hero in battle. This is the same racist attitude many Americans shared after Pearl Harbor towards the Japanese. Major Reno and Captain Benteen took the blame for Custer's massacre, just as Admiral Kimmel and General Short were branded as scapegoats after Pearl Harbor. Only incompetence, treachery, and cowardice, in other words, could explain military defeat by "inferior" races. The insistence that many Americans have with the reasons for the American defeat in Vietnam probably has similar roots in a refusal to believe that (mostly) white Americans could be beaten in a fair fight by little Vietnamese.

The pacifist view of history that Stafford learned so well during the war years held level through forty-five succeeding years of writing poetry. In his poems, Stafford challenges, attacks, expands, and sometimes mocks the usual categories of what is labelled "historical." His poetry rejects the competitive, clashing divisions in mainstream American culture and offers, through his Quaker attitude and Quaker-style writing method, a way for anyone to break free

of the cultural micro-powers that inhibit, judge, and influence us: the powers of materialism, secularism, advertising, romanticism, and war propaganda. A survey of Stafford's poems through his career which examine history and pacifism demonstrate just how profoundly different Stafford's perspective is from mainstream American.

Nuclear Apocalypse

In West of Your City (1960), Stafford formally begins his long assault on history as "heroic" narrative. Stafford's famous anti-war poem "At the Bomb Testing Site" reflects the dawning notion that the next big war could be the last. Stafford lowers us here to a lizard's eye view of nuclear warfare. There are no warrior heroes in sight. War is not glamorized or elevated.

At noon in the desert a panting lizard
waited for history, its elbows tense,
watching the curve of a particular road
as if something might happen.

The "history" that the lizard awaits represents one of the more significant moments in the Cold War: the test detonation of a nuclear warhead. Such martial power is by definition explosively "historical," except, perhaps, to the lizard, which senses history here as akin to death.

It was looking at something farther off
than people could see, an important scene
acted in stone for little selves
at the flute end of consequences.

These "little selves," both animals and humans, are equally incapable of imagining the consequences of the present "test."

There was just a continent without much on it
under a sky that never cared less.
Ready for a change, the elbows waited.
The hands gripped hard on the desert. (STCBT 41)

Since lizards have instincts but not have elbows and hands, we might suppose that all life on earth from Stafford's viewpoint is equally threatened here by nuclear explosions. The geologic earth, on the other hand--"continent" and "stone"--occupies a vast time frame of processes sublimely indifferent to humanity's snapshot in time. Stafford's "deep" earth will continue in spite of our surface nuclear abominations. "At the Bomb Testing Site," like "At the Custer Monument," contains silence at its core. Yet it is a waiting, expectant, active silence that "grips" us "hard." None of us, indeed, can imagine such a sound--will the "panting" lizard survive? Does survival matter to the desert?

"Bi-Focal" is an important early poem that helps to explain Stafford's concept of this historical doubling of time and space. The title reminds us of Stafford's early morning writing position in which he looks, through his reading glasses, alternately near and far--at his journal and out the window. The "truth," therefore, depends on his focus:

Sometimes up out of this land

a legend begins to move.
Is it a coming near
of something under love?

The second stanza is reminiscent of Frost's "Birches" which, like "Bi-Focal," also contrasts the world of human imagination with the cold reality of Nature (while hinting at a heavenly realm). "Birches" speaker concludes that "Earth's the right place for love: / I don't know where it's likely to go better" (118). Stafford's speaker, however, decides that we have little choice in this matter:

Love is of the earth only,
the surface, a map of roads
leading wherever go miles
or little bushes nod.

What we are unable to see, according to Stafford, and can only intuit, is the deeper, slower legend of the earth itself, its unfolding subsurface history.

Not so the legend under,
fixed, inexorable,
deep as the darkest mine
the thick rocks won't tell.

As fire burns the leaf
and out of the green appears
the vein in the center line
and the legend veins under there

This "legend," this unverifiable story of the earth's history, is worth contemplating since it literally holds up our own myopic human view of what is:

So, the world happens twice--
once what we see it as;
second it legends itself
deep, the way it is. (STCBT 48).

In "Bi-Focal," Stafford characteristically ignores the traditional function of a noun like "legend" and puts it into motion as a verb, as a story process inexorably operating underneath our own lives and somehow affecting our own personal histories.

In "Parentage" from Traveling Through the Dark (1962), Stafford returns to one of his life's historical touchstones, his pacifist father.

My father didn't really belong in history.
He kept looking over his shoulder at some mistake.
He was a stranger to me, for I belong.

Like the character George from Down in My Heart, the father here seeks out the lost cause, and the speaker believes that this extreme is as failed as its opposite, worldly success.

Today drinking coffee I look over the cup
And want to have the right amount of fear,
preferring to be saved and not, like him, heroic.

Because of his service as a CO in CPS, Stafford may have felt a more active part of his time's events than his father. Stafford's poetry, in any case, observes that since the common folk wield so little power in America, their lives, though worth remembering, do not appear in the history texts, that if in fact history is the document of power, the common people claim precious little history. Keeping one's balance and integrity in the face of smiling predators and the "wise" requires constant concentration.

I want to be as afraid as the teeth are big,
I want to be as dumb as the wise are wrong:
I'd just as soon be pushed by events to where I
belong. (STCBT 67)

The values that any culture's history esteems come right from its people. In "Prairie Town," Stafford's speaker contemplates the dull, arduous walk of the common pioneer and the prairie dog-like smallness of the midwestern towns that Stafford gratefully escaped. Stafford seems to be questioning the image of the heroic pioneer.

Pioneers, for whom history
was walking through dead grass,
and the main things that happened
were miles and the time of day--
you built that town, and I have let it pass.
Little folded paws, judge me: I came away.
(STCBT 20)

(STCBT 20)

Similarly, in "At Liberty School," the speaker remembers with poignancy the nameless "Girl in the front row who had no mother / and went home every day to get supper." For Stafford, this Kansas girl's simple, quiet sacrifice and dignity ("the class became silent when you left early") rivals the larger historical lessons of the school textbook and the conquering "heroes" contained therein.

Elaborate histories were in our book
but of all the races you were the good;
the taxes of Rome were at your feet. (STCBT 83)

Hers was a heroism and devotion to duty unnoticed by official record but remembered by Stafford's poetic frame.

The Rescued Year (1966) gathers more local history, lost except for Stafford's recording. Family poems appear here about mother and father, "Aunt Mabel," "Uncle George," sister "Ellen," and brother "Tom," an old love "Ella," and the speaker at "Fifteen" discovering a running motorcycle on

its side in the grass. Yet in the midst of nostalgia and Western scenery, appears the startling pacifist work--"Our City Is Guarded by Automatic Rockets"--containing a threat to end all local history. Stafford warns us--this time not from a lizard's but from a missile's eye point of view--that humanity has stumbled to the point where the power of nuclear war has become amoral, apolitical, and irrecoverable. Written at a time when tensions between the superpowers were superheating over Vietnam, Cuba, Korea, and Europe, "Our City Is Guarded by Automatic Rockets" reflects the growing fear that nuclear weaponry might take on a life of its own.

1

Breaking every law except the one
for Go, rolling its porpoise way, the rocket
staggers on its course; its feelers lock
a stranglehold ahead; and--rocking--finders
whispering "Target, Target," back and forth,
relocating all its meaning in the dark,
it freezes on the final stage. I know
that lift and pour, the flick out of the sky
and then the power. Power is not enough.

To a pacifist, military power is, paradoxically, never "enough" to solve the world's problems--simply because such power is always too much and creates more problems ("we had to destroy the village in order to save it"). Stafford knows that doomsday "automatic rockets" are programmed to launch even if their human servants are dead; they cannot, therefore, "guard" anyone alive.

In the last stanza, Stafford's speaker, feeling cornered by the nuclear threat, refuses to be hunted without a fight, without "spitting" an angry protest.

Michael True in An Energy Field More Intense Than War: The Nonviolent Tradition and American Culture (1995) relates that America possesses a long history of nonviolent tradition on which to draw, ranging from John Woolman to Norman Mailer, from Kurt Vonnegut to David Dellinger. Unfortunately, True notes

Most Americans grow up "illiterate" regarding nonviolent conflict resolution and active peacemaking. Most of us are all but helpless in dealing with conflicts in families, schools, neighborhoods, or among governments . . . As a country with a sophisticated tradition of nonviolence, the United States lags behind other countries (Norway, Sweden, the Netherlands) in exploiting this element of its history. (128)

True contends that, at the same time, the American reputation for violence is growing around the world.

Violence is so much a part of American culture in the late twentieth century that one is likely to think of it as the dominant characteristic. People from abroad who know the United States only through its aggressive foreign policy and its popular culture--including gangster/counterinsurgency/war films--certainly perceive us as a violent people. . . . At any

moment, forty or so countries--adversaries and allies--are killing with or dying by weapons "Made in the U. S. A." (xv.)¹⁸

True asserts in his outline of pacifist American literature that such writings have always played a role in alerting Americans to the consequences of war. Sadly, True explains, the teaching of nonviolence has received little concerted development.

Until now, study and research on nonviolence have enjoyed little institutional support from government, the university, or the church in the United States. "Teaching nonviolence" has been left to a handful of groups with limited personnel and financial support, such as the American Friends Service Committee, the Fellowship of Reconciliation, the War Resisters League, and the Catholic Worker movement. As of 1995, only one college in the United States (Colorado College) offers even a minor degree in nonviolence (128).

Stafford's work continues this nonviolent American literary tradition (Stafford's Down in My Heart and his poetry are cited by True), evidencing his continual natural interest in peace and its place in our history. In Stafford's "The Epitaph Ending in And," he furthers his exploration into the unthinkable darkness of nuclear war, symbolically sketching an apocalypse in which everyone perishes, regardless of one's "hawkish" or "dovish" stance toward war:

¹⁸Jane Ciabattari, reporting in Parade magazine November 10, 1996, lists the United States as the top international arms dealer. Over the last eight years the United States has sold 134.9 billion dollars worth of armaments to other nations.

In the last storm, when hawks
blast upward and a dove is
driven into the grass, its broken wings
a delicate design . . .

. . .
This will be
good as an epitaph:

Doves did not know where to fly, and
(STCBT 127)

Stafford's speaker warns that after such a "storm," no one will be left to even record our epitaphs. Stafford and other writers in the 1960s were beginning to realize that unless people put their petty partisan objectives aside and recognize that, in the age of nuclear war, war itself must cease to be a political means, the world body politic itself will end.

The problem with conventional history to Stafford is its inability to consider the wider spiritual reality. The history books, as records of reality, arrogantly exclude as much as they document. Human history pretends to a scope and certainty it cannot achieve. In "Sophocles Says," Stafford writes that "History is a story God is telling, / by means of hidden meanings written closely / inside the skin of things" (STCBT 144). God's history, in other words, is a story of natural processes, including, but not necessarily starring, humanity: "Far over the sun / lonesome curves are meeting, and in the clouds / birds bend the wind. Hunting a rendezvous, / soft as snowflakes ride through a storm their pattern down, / men hesitate a step, touched by home" (144).

In the second stanza, we might surmise (along with the title's hint) that Stafford is alluding to Sophocles' great tragedy Oedipus Rex. In it Oedipus, fleeing from dire prophecies, unknowingly kills his father. When he arrives at Thebes (his true family's city), he must have felt oddly at home:

A man passes among strangers; he never smiles;
the way a flame goes begging among the trees
he goes, and he suffers, himself, the kind of dark
that anything sent from God experiences,
until he finds through trees the lights of a
town--
a street, the houses blinded in the rain--
and he hesitates a step, shocked--at home.

This idea of being constantly a stranger but at home coincides with Stafford's strong sense of always being a part of the world. Stafford's native optimism here turns classical tragedy around. He finds a way to redeem the inherent Oedipal violence in the human soul, through which we kill our human family; it is salvaged through God's cathartic grace.

For God will take a man, no matter where,
and make some scene a part of what goes on:
there will be a flame; there will be a snowflake
form;

• • •

--that man
will hesitate a step--and meet his home.

By the time of the publication of Allegiances in 1970, Stafford seems to have realized that the causes of hatred, bigotry, and war must be challenged, indeed, at home. In "Monuments for a Friendly Girl at a Tenth Grade Party,"

Stafford's speaker remembers a girl who sympathized with his own refusal to embrace small town values:

. . . .
and we found each other alive,
by our glances never to accept our town's
ways, torture for advancement,
nor ever again be prisoners by choice.

"Ruth," like her Biblical namesake, has been faithful to her greater human family and to working for peace.

Now I learn you died
serving among the natives of Garden City,
Kansas, part of a Peace Corps
before governments thought of it.

The Peace Corps was, significantly, Kennedy's brainchild; Stafford gently reminds us that committed pacifists have worked quietly for peace without "heroic" recognition, without leaving home. Stafford's Ruth is a real hero: unsung, faithful, loved and remembered by her friends, not needing patriotic appeals or stone monuments to motivate her.

Vietnam Protester

By the late 1960s and Vietnam, Stafford's new fame had brought him into demand as a war protest poet. Television was bringing the Vietnam War into an eerie proximity. In "Evening News," he writes, "a war happens, / only an eighth of an inch thick." The relatively uncensored news reporting from Vietnam (certainly when compared with World War II), chronicling American casualties and setbacks, inevitably turned even many hawks against the war. Anti-war demonstrations and social turbulence also got played out on

American livingroom screens: "Some of our friends have leaped / through, disappeared, become unknown / voices and rumors of crowds" (STCBT 183). The unreality of televised war scenes and civic turmoil prompts the speaker to wander uncertainly through his house and outside "to check where we live. / In the yard I pray birds, / wind, unscheduled grass, / that they please help to make / everything go deep again" (184). It is the constancy of the deeper legend that the speaker seeks, the unmoving Quaker center in the midst of a wheel of violence.

Stafford regards the circle of war like an unnatural, completely avoidable disaster. "Time Capsule" from Smoke's Way (1973) recalls an earlier war storm. We might imagine the speaker discovering an old letter or newspaper clipping that reminds him of the past, possibly the late 1930s:

That year the news
was a storm, a wind that
puzzled monuments. Wrecks piled up
on the Coast . . .

The "wrecks" here probably refer to storm damage (but also presage the merchant ships sunk by the dozens by U Boats roaming the Atlantic coast in early 1942). At the "year's end," the speaker and his friends, on the verge of history, sing "an old composition," wrap up "the scraps for the stock," and then go "westward up the river . . . all the way home" (STCBT 32).

By "Time Capsule's" end, the storm has turned into a direct metaphor for the coming war.

That year the news was
not only free, it was mandatory.
The barometer said "War."
To the west gulls came
in like tracers.

Nature itself, even gulls, seems to have turned into fearful war symbols. Still the speaker recalls the profound contrast between world and local events where "back on the farm it was calm / and pigs ate the greasy newspapers" (STCBT 33). One might read these last lines as a nostalgic memory of pre-World War II isolationism and naivete. Another possible interpretation, however, would be to understand the "calm" as not before the storm, but at the center of it--that is, as representing pacifist composure in the midst of conflict. A third possibility is that Stafford is warning us that we are being as oblivious to the threat of nuclear destruction as Americans were complacent about the coming war in the 1930s; and, in fact, future generations may dig up such records as evidence of our stupidity.

Stories That Could Be True (1977)--the title of both a separate book and a collection of Stafford's previous books--continues Stafford's challenge to mainstream American history as a record of objective reality. The title, for example, converges with Stafford's longstanding idea that a poet's job is not only to record the stories of the culture, but to roam forward towards future possibilities, "to find out what the world is trying to be." "Things in the Wild

"Need Salt" starts with the assumption that the human historical perspective on the past is not only not objective, recoverable fact, but is actually a wildly imaginative story.

Of the many histories, Earth tells only one--Earth misses many things people tell about, like maybe there are earthquakes that we should have had, or animals that know more love than God felt.

And we need these things: things in the wild need salt. (STCBT 18)

While the Earth's processes indelibly move, we humans create histories out of what we need--what could or should have happened--legends, myths--and these fictional-factual stories help keep us alive and centered in the "wild."

Stafford's dogged pacifism in the face of the wilderness of nuclear annihilation prompted him to participate in many demonstrations for peace. "Peace Walk" which seems to recount an anti-nuclear war protest recaptures some of the ambivalent, alienated feelings of the CPS men in the 1940s who wanted to be Americans but rejected the war culture around them. The anti-nuclear war protesters here are walkers, not marchers--in it, apparently, for the long haul.

We wondered what our walk should mean,
taking that un-march quietly;
the sun stared at our signs--"Thou shalt not
kill."

As the "walkers" move down the street, they encounter citizens who, while no doubt recognizing the signs' Biblical

injunction, look on from their different culture and reject the sentiment.

Men by a tavern said, "Those foreigners . . ." to a woman with a fur, who turned away--like an elevator going down, their look at us.

The working men by the tavern and the wealthy fur-draped woman unite, ironically, in their distaste for the "foreign" demonstrators.

Farther down the street the peace walkers pass "a picket line" whose own signs say "'Unfair.'" The workers stare at the strange walkers, unable, perhaps, to connect capitalist oppression to war-making. The demonstrators arrive at their terminus, a park, and the speaker hears someone making a speech to the effect that the power of "love could fill the atmosphere" and somehow "slow that other fallout." Finally the demonstrators "just walked away," unsure whether their dogged protest has had any measurable effect: "no one was there to tell us where to leave the signs" (STCBT 24). This curiously flat, prosaic ending encourages a re-reading, to see what the walk and the poem "mean"--ambiguous feelings and questions gather in the stillness. Do we carry God's commandments, his "signs," home with us, or should we leave them elsewhere--and where?

Hunting and War: "I Hold the Duck Head"

Stafford's objections to war and violence are sometimes expressed by analogy. Among Stafford's many childhood memory poems are several about hunting. "Many Things Are

"Hidden By the Light" is framed in Quaker terms of light and dark.

Now I remember, letting the dark flood in, how we used to shoot animals, and how they were afraid. We stared into hedges. What we saw we killed.

(All About Light n. p.)

As a boy, Stafford remembers his father bringing a shotgun home for duck hunting; oddly, the shotgun is Stafford's "first great aesthetic experience." He describes it lovingly in an essay:

The blue barrel, shiny walnut stock: I stood admiring the gun where it stood in the corner. My father carefully handed it to me. He opened it and let me look out the long deep, cool, mirrored barrel. He told me about walnut and how it was selected and made into gunstocks. My fingers roved along the grain. How smooth it was! Just as I thought of making a story when I read one, I thought of making a gunstock, selecting the tree, hacking out a form, polishing it . . .

("William 328)

There is a boyish joy that Stafford acknowledges here. Shooting animals, thus, is an easy step away from admiring a shotgun; and, if one accepts the right propaganda, killing the human enemy is also painless.

"Many Things Are Hidden" concludes not in the Quaker light of Christ, but in darkness.

Now I know by the cold: at night those hedges run the crazy fields and we children of light stagger and flash, lost where we triumph, reeling our steadiness towards our terrible homes.

The Quaker "children of light" hunt in a daylight that has become itself a symbolic darkness because of the killing, or because hunting becomes an analogy for making war.

Stafford explains in his autobiographical essay that such hunting trips with his father in the early dawn beside the Arkansas River were reverent experiences:

On west was The Salt Marsh. Teal would be coming in, canvasbacks, buffleheads. In the early dark we crept through tall weeds, past mysterious trees. At first light long scarfs of ducks came in talking to each other as they dropped. The seething cattails and grasses whispered and gushed in the shadows. And the river was there, going on westward, past islands, along groves, into the wilderness, an endless world for exploring. I stop now and worship those times. (322)

Yet while the outdoor setting is evocative and beautiful, Stafford diverges at this river from the sport of killing, just as he later diverges from the mainstream as a CO.

In his poem "At the Salt Marsh" (placed after the above passage), Stafford confesses his fascination with guns and their ultimate power:

Those teal with traveling wings
had done nothing to us but they were meat
and we waited for them with killer guns
in the blind deceitful in the rain.

The situation, if indeed autobiographical, is completely ironic. The young Stafford, while reveling in both the sacred senses of Nature and the bond of love with his father, is confused by the ritual death of the beautiful teal. The pacifist father seems out of place to the speaker, even though the two are hunting for food apparently out of necessity.

They flew so arrowy till when they fell
where the dead grass bent flat and wet
that I looked for something after nightfall
to come tell me why it was all right.

By the fire that night, the speaker touches "the soft head with eyes gone." Perhaps Stafford did not so simply inherit or idealistically stumble upon his pacifism, but, in an epiphany like this one, touched and somehow understood the consequences of killing and the finality of death: "and felt through the feathers all the dark." Perhaps he embraced at once the death of the beautiful and his own human complicity in killing and began to ask himself the difficult personal questions about his own stance in the matter; the speaker "scatters" his questions in shotgun fashion, hoping for a hit:

Still I wonder, out through the raw blow
out over the rain that levels the reeds,
how broken parts can be wrong but true.
I scatter my asking. I hold the duck head.
(STCBT 31)

The Reagan Years

By the early 1980s when Stafford came out with A Glass Face in the Rain (1982), America and the world were entering the fourth decade of nuclear anxiety. The Reagan years were beginning, offering both heightened ideological conflict with the USSR and changing Soviet leadership. Reeling from the national humiliation that was Carter's Iranian hostage crisis, Americans looked to Reagan and his rebuilding military to reclaim the national honor. As memories of the disaster in Vietnam faded, militarism rose again.

"Not Very Loud" begins in familiar, quiet Stafford fashion; the speaker is observing moths at night: "Now is

the time of the moths that come / in the evening. They are around, just being / there, at windows and doors." Like Frost's speaker in "Design" who also wonders about a moth's flight, Stafford's speaker observes and questions: "They crowd / the lights, planing in from dark fields / and liking it in town. How do they know / what is coming?" The question is puzzling; the speaker feels a foreboding about their movement. "What are moths good for?" the speaker asks. Typically, Stafford's speaker is attempting to make sense of the processes of life. The answer as to the meaning of the moths may lie in their motion and the evolving "design" of the world, rather than in any static order they may represent.

. . . Maybe they offer something we need, a fluttering near the edge of our sight, and they may carry whatever is needed for us to watch all through those long nights in our still, vacant houses, if there is another war.

The idea of a war coming is surprising, though not unprepared for. The flight of the moths "planing in from dark fields" is ominously analogous to Soviet bombers heading for the lights of American cities. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, though numbed to the possibility of nuclear attack, Americans were still aware of its threat fluttering on the edge of vision.

Predictably, a few poems after "Not Very Loud" in A Glass Face, Stafford places another apocalyptic vision, "An Event At Big Eddy." The threat of some final fiery judgment

presses down upon the world like the weight of a river on rock.

The whole weight of the river
leans into the rock at Big Eddy.
We camped and let that rush
report something all night to us--
a hint of the earth tied down
quivering like an animal.

The speaker relates this compression and pressure to human "faces like that / trying not to act . . . knowers wild / when the spin of their lives hits / them" (28). When the end comes to us, "the torque at the pole" will "grab the center of the world." At this point "everyone" will "run into the street, and know, / and hold the face still with both hands" (28). There is a knowing here that Stafford hints at; possibly it is an accounting for personal actions towards others and the "quivering" earth.

"How It Is" time travels back to a moment in the 1940s to the war by which we measure all wars. The scene is familiar. Young American men by the thousands, including Stafford, are leaving home to serve their country. Family and friends see them off.

It is war. They put us on a train and say, "Go." A bell wakes up the engine as we move along past the crowd.

Stafford, the pacifist, has been "drafted" into Civilian Public Service, not the Army; he is heading in an entirely different direction from his hometown peers.

and a child--one clear small gaze from all the
town--
finds my face. I wave. For long I look

back. "I'm not a soldier," I want to say.
But the gaze is left behind. And I'm gone.
(AGFTR 48)

Stafford captures a typical moment of miscommunication and frustration for a pacifist who wants to witness his stance. The speaker realizes, ironically, that the child gazing up at the heroic would-be soldiers naturally assumes that he is one as well. After all, heroes are fighters.

Some of Stafford's most effective anti-war poems are quiet and unassuming. "Things I Learned Last Week" presents a list of simple observations derived apparently from both empirical experience and casual reading. Stafford employs a light touch, until the end.

Ants, when they meet each other,
usually pass on the right.

Sometimes you can open a sticky
door with your elbow.

A man in Boston has dedicated himself
to telling about injustice.
For three thousand dollars he will
come to your town and tell you about it.

Schopenhauer was a pessimist but
he played the flute.

Some things that the speaker has learned are true and useful; some belie the truth of appearance. Stafford, determined to cull art from the mash of experience, considers the Modernist perspective.

Yeats, Pound and Eliot saw art as
growing from other art. They studied that.

Increasingly, in his sixties, Stafford writes about death; it is a new process to learn about, decide about, and prepare for.

If I ever die, I'd like it to be
in the evening. That way, I'll have
all the dark to go with me, and no one
will see how I begin to hobble along.

These thoughts of death prompt the speaker to consider the death of the world through war.

In The Pentagon one person's job is to take pins out of towns, hills, and fields, and then save the pins for later. (AGFITR 66)

The Pentagon, thus, relegates the living geography of the earth to targets and objectives in the game of war.

Inhabitants and their surroundings get reduced on the military scale of meaning to the significance of an ant farm. War at the command level becomes impersonal manipulation of assets. The personal death with dignity that the speaker would wish does not figure into grand military strategy. The pins, of course, are reusable, which is the truest plan of any professional army, that is, self-perpetuation.

In "Hanging Tough" the speaker looks back reluctantly at the American heartland the source of so many values that Stafford opposes:

All right, I'll ask about home:--How is the grass
that lived all over the hills? Does the
cottonwood
tree still dance by the road to town?"
Has the river found that island it talked

about all night to the bridge? Do the houses
wait for the moon and offer their porches?

From asking about the beauty of the countryside, the speaker reluctantly draws closer to the human subject which he has avoided as too painful and difficult.

But the people I won't ask about. Their voices lurk behind their doors, where they always were, for me. As I turn away I'll say it again-- after their wars, after their various affairs, their lives they'll just have to take care of alone, for themselves. (AGFITR 70)

War and secret infidelity appear on the same poetic line, symptomatic of the same core of small town immorality. The speaker is "hanging tough" to his ideals, but it has cost him to leave this side of America because so few people share his outlook.

"What Ever Happened to the Beats?"

Stafford even felt alienated from the protest generation of the 1950s and 1960s because he felt so different with his pacifist background. In "What Ever Happened to the Beats?" he contemplates a time of eastern spirituality, creativity, and moral turbulence.

On that street in San Francisco
in a room behind the temple
where a hand was always clapping,
it has stopped to listen
for the sound of the other hand.

Many will fall again where these
chosen fell: they ran to meet what
came, a war one generation--, peace and
its drugs the next. Veterans now,
they hobble on, still shouting, "Now!"

These lines recall the Vietnam War chant, "Peace Now!"

Somewhere in the listening, meditative silence, Stafford believes, are the answers to all of the old revolutionary questions, but they are embedded deep in the American culture and psyche. Today we are a people who struggle against unseen powers in Foucault's undeclared conflict.

On the corner a church has a sign:
The hardest war to fight
is the one you don't know you're in,
the one it takes quiet to find. (AGFITR 113)

How paradoxical that first, one might need silence "to find" a war and that secondly, anyone would want to. This is what Foucault would describe as capitalism's continuing silent war against the people.

An Oregon Message (1987) continues exploring Stafford's concerns with war, spirituality, Nature, and history. History and what it includes is particularly important in this collection. Stafford's speaker in "A Voice From the Past" also wonders what has happened to the voices and faces of the 1960s.

I never intended this face, believe me,
friends; but it's hard not to be, when
history comes looking for subjects.

Others from the sixties got away somehow,
some by death, many by stealth,
and fell away through time.

Stafford, a 1960s survivor, can only present his time-worn face to contemporary America. There is also the double sense here that history claims us without our volition if we happen to be in the right place.

In muted bravado, I've slithered to here,
tooting a tiny horn, celebrating
what comes, being historical.

Now I pretend to belong to today,
saying my name over and over
and being my face, and sorry. (AOM 19)

Stafford's name and what it stands for--peace,
reconciliation--has not changed since the 1940s. If we
equate the speaker with Stafford, we sense the irony of a
"now" poet who often feels relegated to the historical past.

"Confessions of an Individual" gives us more of
Stafford's musings and apologies about the role of the
artist within the "great" events of history. There is an
irreverence here toward history which is both playful and
revealing.

I let history happen--sorry. When Muslims and
Christians fought in the Crusades,
I didn't stop it;
the Egyptians and Jews clashed and my efforts were
not sufficient to prevent that.

Stafford's speaker implies that war is, indeed, the
locomotive of history and that any individual is powerless
to prevent ancient conflicts. In these two examples,
different peoples of different points of view are fighting
over the same area for various reasons.

Remote effects from these
disasters still exist, and I have not erased them.
My ancestors were busy cutting hay,
planting potatoes,
and so on. True, they probably spent a lot of
time drinking
and talking, and I let that go on for years--
I can't deny it.

The tone here is probably poking fun at confessional poetry, among other things--as though any individual could egocentrically claim responsibility for world events. Stafford's speaker, instead of identifying with national groups, belongs to a family, living among other families. Families, obviously, only want to live in peace.

We get more of Stafford's true heroes here, not the warriors, but the inventors, the nurturers, the builders, and the healers.

On the other hand, a group
of people discovered wheat,
corn, smelting of iron, prevention
of disease, and I didn't
help very much. Heroic actions
took place, and I didn't
even take the trouble to be there.

What the writer does and can do, however, is record it.

Now I am taking the time to think
about all this and
write it down. And you
are taking the time to read it. (AOM 20)

This poem could be viewed as a limited way to look at the function of a poet, not, in other words, as the scop of warriors but as an ordinary person. But in Stafford's conception the poet also functions as ponderer and assigner of significance, performing moral maintenance for the culture.

Ground Zero

An important aspect of such maintenance for Stafford centers around the imaginative rendering of nuclear disaster

as historical record and warning. "Ground Zero" is a chilling anti-war poem as told from a victim's perspective.

A bomb photographed me on the stone,
on a white wall, a burned outline where
the bomb rays found me out in the open
and ended me, person and shadow, never to cast
a shadow again.

Stafford's description recalls accounts from Hiroshima and Nagasaki. John Toland describes this photographic effect on Japanese victims at ground zero at Hiroshima in The Rising Sun: The Decline and Fall of the Japanese Empire 1936-1945:

The heat emanating from the fireball lasted a fraction of a second but was so intense (almost 300,000 degrees Centigrade) that it melted the surface of granite within a thousand yards of the hypocenter, or ground zero--directly under the burst. . . . All over the center of the city numerous silhouettes were imprinted on walls. On Yorozuyo Bridge ten people left permanent outlines of themselves on the railing and the tar-paved surface. (782)

Ground zero is the victor's aiming point and the losers' stance. In the last lines of the poem, Stafford attempts to merge the Japanese point of view--the enemy's--with anyone's, with ours. A nuclear photograph could someday also capture us in its grim historical portrait.

People on Main Street
used to stand in their certain chosen places--
I walk around them. It wouldn't be right
if I stood there.
But all of their shadows are mine now--
I am so white on the stone. (AOM 36)

Stafford's unusual "Graffiti" also describes violent markings on the wall--on the text of the world: "What's on the wall will influence your life, / they say; but erasing

the wall will remind / everyone what was there." The graffiti debate is strident, unofficial, random.

"Kill the tyrants," lovers of mankind say, and the religious write firmly, "Jesus saves." "A wall for not writing on" and "I waited an hour" are two that commuters must read.

And--remember?--

Daniel Boone carved "kilt a bar" on a tree.

"One of the ways" for a city "to live is to learn how to look away" ignoring the messages, the speaker says.

Stafford the pacifist, of course, would find paradox in "killing" tyrants out of a love for people. Also, the Quaker in Stafford would be suspicious of doctrinal claims to salvation (and would wait for more than an hour).

The speaker leaps from city graffiti to Daniel Boone's legendary country markings. These remind Stafford's speaker of the many destructive actions not taken--and how it occurs that perhaps the absence of action, the preservation of what is--that is, the living, the beautiful--redeems humanity.

But the trees not carved and walls undefaced mean "Not even Kilroy was here," and millions of us haven't killed anyone, or a bear, or even an hour. We haven't presumed. And--who knows?--maybe we're saved.
(AOM 45)

The famous "Kilroy was here," a humorous World War II era message left in unauthorized places, is curiously evocative. We imagine a young soldier adopting a protective pseudonym and thumbing his nose at having to serve. "George Washington slept here" also comes to mind, the more patriotic and patrician example. The "kill" in "Kilroy" is

also, of course, the repeated, central idea of the poem. Instead of Prufrock's timid indecision--"How shall I presume?"--Stafford suggests that not acting, not preaching, not defacing, and not killing could be the courageous and moral choices.

"For the Unknown Enemy" explores Stafford's radical idea that our enemies are just as human as we are and that dividing the world into heroes and villains is always simplistic.

This monument is for the unknown good in our enemies. Like a picture their life began to appear: they gathered at home in the evening and sang. Above their fields they saw a new sky. A holiday came and they carried the baby to the park for a party. Sunlight surrounded them.

Like Stafford's earlier "At the Un-National Monument Along the Canadian Border," "For the Unknown Enemy" plays off the idea of the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier at Arlington and in other countries. Stafford's imaginary monument is not an obelisk or a tomb for war dead, but a photograph of a peaceful family on a holiday gathering in the park. The Christian command to love one's enemies becomes easier to swallow, Stafford's poem suggests, if we can get past the propaganda version of an evil adversary and identify with that enemy's humanity.

Here we glimpse what our minds long turned away from. The great mutual blindness darkened that sunlight in the park,
This monument says that one afternoon

we stood here letting a part of our minds escape. They came back, but different.
Enemy: one day we glimpsed your life.

This monument is for you. (AOM 46)

The next brief poem called "Being an American" probes Stafford's enduring belief that Americans have been relentlessly subjected to capitalism's view about what ought to be noted and remembered.

Some network has bought history, all the rights,
for wars and games. At home the rest of us
wait. Nothing happens, of course.

This poem from the mid-1980s eerily prophesies the entertainment extravaganza that was the Gulf War as seen on CNN. The irony about Gulf War reporting was that the Pentagon so completely controlled press access. What seemed to be the truth of the war was actually a skillfully censored version of precision smart bombs and controlled press briefings. Ordinary people suspect that the truth is being kept from them but are powerless to reach it.

We know that somewhere our times are alive and flashing, for real. We sigh. If we had been rich we could have lived like that. Maybe even yet we could buy a little bit of today and see how it is.

When a Washington correspondent like Cokie Roberts can get thirty thousand dollars from a corporate advertiser for an hour's talk, then truth is ultimately for sale ("Why America"). This purchasing of "a little bit of today" is Stafford's antidote to the powers that control the news and the history that flows out of these manipulated stories.

Stafford suggests that writing can help us stay in touch with and record the "felt truth" of our reality.

"A Dream of Descartes" is a cryptic poem unless compared to other similar Stafford efforts. "A Dream" begins redolent with the familiar Stafford early morning setting; signals are coming in.

When dawn comes along any morning it carries
a thin, faint message falling from unearthly
height all the way into the world--
how north from here waits a forest, and north
from there a storm that will never stop,
more arctic than zero,
sending those knives of cold.

In the Stafford process, early morning, Nature, silence, and receptivity combine to enable the poet to discover certain knowledge.

And you begin to know--things that happen
clash; they sound in the real wind, but
beyond them come forms:

Another layer of reality exists as possibility: what might happen or what we might evade. The speaker senses the forms of the future:

muffled but there, wars we didn't
have, epidemics where heroes died
except that they didn't happen, the years
left out of time, our walls we didn't
build, and--spaced all the way to forever--
our inexhaustible inheritance, Pride and
Ignorance. (AOM 52)

In the tradition of Milton and Swift, Stafford's speaker arrives inexorably at the deadliest of disaster-producing sins. "Pride" (appropriately capitalized) spawns arrogance, competition, patriotism, and belligerence, while "Ignorance"

gives birth to repeated epidemics of misunderstanding and hatred. Underneath this grim perspective is the triumph of Descartes' human mind: "I think; therefore, I am"--not a butterfly's dream, but a movement of the mind.

Help from History

Pride and ignorance sometimes crumble in the face of emerging historical truth; what we do not know does not threaten the story we prefer to live in. In "Help from History," the first person speaker, apparently representative of the World War II generation, looks back, wanting to believe in American goodness and exceptionalism:

Please help me know it happened,
that life I thought we had--

Our friends holding out their hands
to us--
Our enemies mistaken, infected by
unaccountable prejudice--
Our country benevolent, a model
for all governments, good-willed--
Those mad rulers at times elsewhere,
inhuman and yet mob-worshipped,
leaders of monstrous doctrine, unspeakable
beyond belief, yet strangely attractive to
the uninstructed.

The speaker, during times of national ambivalence and difficulty, looks back longingly towards our common heroic history ("The Good War") to remind himself of American courage, goodness, and purity of political motive. Meanwhile, the great and small Hitlers of the world help us define the evil enemy and thus our own goodness by contrast. For Stafford, of course, the American government and its leaders--as extensions of commercial interests--employ the

same mind control methods used by these "mad" "mob-worshipped leaders of monstrous doctrine." The "normal" American speaker simply cannot fathom how other peoples could so naively believe in such diseased propaganda.

Past family history, too, like national history might also help us center ourselves when personal lives threaten to break down.

And please let me believe these incredible legends that have dignified our lives--

The wife or husband helplessly loving us,
the children full of awe and affection,
the dog insanely faithful--
Our growing up hard--hard times, being
industrious and reliable--
The places we lived arched full of
serene golden light--

The "golden" memories, of course, do not exactly square with the post-World War II reality of the ugly American abroad and the threatened American family at home--from divorce, layoffs, drugs, and abuse.

Now, menaced by judgments, overheard revisions,
let me retain what ignorance it takes
to preserve what we need--
a past that redeems any future. (AOM 128)

Stafford's generation has had to endure revisionist history that has chipped away at the golden "legend" of America as savior of and moral model to the world.

The title of Stafford's last book, Passwords (1991), plays on the idea of the secret military code word, the word that will help us distinguish between friend and foe. If we know what to say, we are passed through the lines to

acceptance--even by strangers. In "Local Events" Stafford shows us what happens when strangers cannot communicate the right words. The speaker, after harsh words are said, is assaulted in the street.

A mouth said a bad word. A foot
kicked me. One brick in the pavement
stared into my left eye, and a noise
came close and closer--a siren. (Passwords 12)

The dying speaker hears his assailant explain that "Listen . . . he asked for it." The familiar conversational phrase is, of course, darkly ironic since no one would ask to be kicked. Between the "bad word" and the trite explanation, precious little communication occurs. "A red color / spread slowly across the road" and the speaker breathes a last, "long breath." Stafford graphically dramatizes what would be a routine local murder that one might hear daily on the local news. Most Americans, though, lack the emotional framework to even react to the message; we hear it without understanding how local violence affects all of our lives, all of our personal histories.

"News Every Day"--offers this same local message but expands it to an international scale. The poem begins with Stafford's characteristic observation of Nature:

Birds don't say it just once. If they like it
they say it again. And again, every morning.
I heard a bird congratulating itself
all day for being a jay.
Nobody cared. But it was glad
all over again, and said so, again.

The jay's mindless repetition reminds Stafford's speaker of a similar human trait.

Many people are fighting each other, in the world.
You could learn that and say, "Many people
are fighting each other, in the world."
It would be true, but saying it wouldn't
make any difference. But you'd say it.
Birds are like that. People are like that.
(Passwords 13)

The implication seems clear here that people announcing violence and wars everyday in the news or to each other does little to stop or prevent it. Only through organizations like the Fellowship of Reconciliation, perhaps, can people work practically for world peace.

Stafford often turns to the Native American culture to express his unique sense of history and myth. In "Paso por Aqui," the speaker contemplates both the natural and the human past at the graveyard at Buffalo Gap.

Comanches tell how the buffalo
wore down their own pass through these hills,
herds pouring over for years, not finding
a way but making it by going there.

This buffalo way jibes completely with Stafford the artist's writing method of creating by the very act of motion. The speaker identifies with the Native American's spiritual yet earthly perspective:

Comanche myself, I bow my head
in the graveyard at Buffalo Gap and begin
to know the world as a land invented
by breath, its hills and plains guided
and anchored in place by thought, by feet.

The graveyard at Buffalo Gap marks a typical Stafford confluence of life rivers: the buffalo, their Comanche

hunters, and the white pioneers--life, death, and suffering sharing in the deep silence of history.

Tombstones lean all around--marble, and pitiful limestone agonies, recording in worn-out words the travailed, the loved bodies that rest here. No one comes quietly enough to surprise them; the earth brims with whatever they gave.

It spills
long horizons ahead of us, and we part its grass
from above, staring hard enough to begin
to see a world, long like Texas,
deep as history goes after it happens,
and ahead of us, pawed by our impatience.

We came over the plains. Where are we going?
(Passwords 17)

Stafford himself traveled like a pioneer westward from Kansas to California and Oregon. We contemporary Americans, too, like our ancestors, part the grass with our impatient, heavy going forward. Will we, like the buffalo--like the Comanche--also be slaughtered? Will we simply fade from view as history passes over?

Stafford apparently wrote two poems with similar themes entitled "Ground Zero" The second, from Passwords, celebrates the constancy of Nature even as human nature is suffused with anxiety. The title (as in the previous "Ground Zero") plays off the feelings Americans have endured for decades, that of being the targets of foreign weapons. In the midst of our intermittent angst, however, is the natural world, counter-offering the sacred invasion of life.

While we slept--
rain found us last night, easing in
from the coast, a few leaves at first,
then ponds. The quietest person in the state

heard the mild invasion. Before it was over every field knew that benediction.

The speaker and another person are talking over breakfast about the latest depressing news stories--even while surrounded by the natural beauty of the morning.

At breakfast--

while we talked some birds passed, then slanted north, wings emphasizing earth's weight but overcoming it. "There's no hope," you said. Our table had some flowers cascading color from their vase. Newspapers muttered repression and shouted revolution.

The speaker's companion does not notice the ironic contrast between there being "no hope" and "flowers cascading color." The trick, perhaps, to Stafford is to learn to bend gracefully with the "earth's weight" rather than be buried under it.

A breeze lifted curtains; they waved easily. "Why can't someone do something!" My hand began its roving, like those curtains, and the flowers bending, and the far-off bird wings.

Part of Stafford's role as a poet is to alert us to the relationship between noticing Nature with care and acting on our responsibility for it; Nature is both source of hope and obligation. If we lose our connection to the world of the present and to its unfolding history, then we become alienated from being part of its movement and helpless in the face of changing currents.

Even at the end of his life, Stafford felt the pull of wartime memories. It may not be an exaggeration to say that

the open air prison that was Civilian Public Service taught him how to be free. "In Camp" begins wistfully; the speaker realizes that though the memory may be fresh, the cause that has helped form his life is far in the past.

That winter of the war, every day
sprang outward. I was a prisoner.
Someone brought me gifts. That year
now is far: birds can't fly
the miles to find a forgotten cause.

Robert Lowell in his "Memories of West Street and Lepke," a look back at his own prison experience as a CO, similarly feels a strange nostalgia for the difficult but formative past. Lowell's speaker asks, "Ought I to regret my seedtime? / I was a fire-breathing Catholic C. O., / and made my manic statement, / telling off the state and president . . ." Both Lowell and Stafford look back at that moment of youth in which right and wrong seemed clear. Stafford, like Lowell, feels the contrast between wartime memory and life in the present.

No task I do today has justice
at the end. All I know is my degree
of leaning in this wind
where--once the mind springs free--
every cause has reason
but reason has no law.

There must be a higher, accessible law, in other words, to govern reason, or one cause might be argued and defended as well as another. For Stafford, few injunctions are as clear-cut as "thou shalt not kill." "In Camp" ends with a disarming couplet.

In camps like that, if I should go again,
I'd still study the gospel and play the accordion.
(Passwords 81)

Although these lines read like a whimsical non sequitur, the gospel reference here recalls the "law" that the speaker needs, and the accordion suggests the ideas of "accord" and music (no matter how common or unmusical), ideas which have guided Stafford's life.

Among Stafford's last poems in Passwords is "Something to Declare," summing up his views on war, history, peace, and faith. All of Stafford's natural forces converge here in earth, river, and wind.

They have never had a war big enough
to slow that pulse in the earth under
our path near that old river.

Even as a swallow swims through the air
a certain day skips and returns, hungry for
the feel and lift of the time passed by.

Stafford has come far--a swallow buffeted by the storms of an unholy century; but no storm has been yet able to kill the earth.

That was the place where I lived awhile
dragging a wing, and the spin of the world
started its tilt into where it is now.

They say that history is going on somewhere.
They say it won't stop. I have held
one picture still for a long time and waited.

The unnamed and unholy "they" wield the power, start the wars, and declaim what is and is not historical. The speaker, however, looking perhaps at an old photograph, knows he is in the presence of the historical because the

picture is significant. True to the Quaker path, the speaker waits patiently for a response and then drops the picture into the river.

This is only a little report floated
into the slow current so the wind will know
which way to come if it wants to find me.
(Passwords 85)

William Stafford's life and work are about freedom. His is a voice of reason and peace in a century of madness. In "The Whole Wide World Pours Down": Remembering William Stafford, Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress 1970-71, Stafford's son Kim gracefully eulogizes his father:

Who will take my father's place in the world of poetry? No one. Who will take his place in this daily practice of the language of the tribe? Anyone who wishes. He said once the field of writing will never be crowded--not because people can't do important work, but because they don't think they can. This way of writing beckons to anyone who wishes to rise and listen, to write without fear of either achievement or failure. There is no burden, only a beckoning. (12)

William Stafford reminds us that freedom and discovery help make us human and keep us a part of the greater humanity.

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